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THE RIVAL RED HAT SPORTS;



OR, THE
Shady Gambler's High Hand

A STORY OF THE
Miners of Dead Man's Gulch.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "THE SOFT-HAND DETECTIVE,"
"OLD '49," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

UP IN THE MOUNTAINS.

It was a lovely morning in June, and we begin our story in one of those beautiful valleys in Montana which make that Territory a very paradise in some parts.

"SILENCE, YOU COWARDLY CUR!" THUNDERED CUNNINGHAM.

And what renders these valleys so especially attractive to the white man, is that, in the hills which hem them in, crop out vast stores of gold and silver, and nature has been so kind, that, in some instances, the precious metals can be extracted so easily the common miner, with ordinary tools, can make a good living.

On this morning of which we write, two men came down through this particular gulch.

Both men were comfortably dressed, and had a little burro, upon which were packed their tools and provisions.

The younger was a handsome fellow, stout of limb and muscular in proportions, yet as light on his feet as a dancing master.

He was called Mark Mansfield, but among his associates had got the name of "Mountain Mark," and was seldom called anything else.

The elder was possibly ten or twelve years older, but from the fact that his hair was a light gray, worn quite short—that his beard and whiskers were of the same hue, and had been so for twenty years—everybody called him "Old Steve."

But, if anybody wanted to find out whether Steve was merely old in name, yet not so in nature, all they had to do was to try a tussle with him; then they would speedily discover that appearances are sometimes very deceptive.

"What do you think of this little valley?" Mountain Mark asked, as they advanced into it.

"Waal, that cropping out of rock, over yander, looks as if it might amount to something. We will have a try at it."

As they were proceeding to get out their tools for this "try," a handsome young girl, mounted on a clay-colored broncho, rode into the valley, and advancing, pulled her broncho to a halt.

"Good-morning, gentlemen!" she saluted. "Are you prospecting?"

Off came their hats and both prospectors made her a polite bow.

"Yes, miss," responded Mountain Mark, who, being the nearer to her, took it upon himself to reply.

"This bit of soil looks promising, and we thought we'd see if there was anything in it."

"I do not believe you will succeed in striking any metal, for this particular belt has been thoroughly explored, and only one hit made in over two hundred miles."

"Well, that isn't much of a prize for so great a distance," the young miner observed.

"It is the truth; this portion of country is very poor, but, at Red Rock Bar, about five miles below here, on this very trail, there has been a remarkable strike," the young girl explained.

"The very place we are looking for," Mountain Mark averred, with a laugh.

"Just the place to suit us," Old Steve added.

"I don't doubt that it will, for almost everybody who reaches there stays, and that is a pretty good proof of what a town is like," the young lady responded.

"Of course, a man like myself, a chip floating on the surface of the water, careless whether I go here, or whether I go there, is not particular in regard to his destination," Mark sermonized.

"Still, I should think that even a man like yourself, would long to get a chance to settle down," the girl remarked, in surprise. "Suppose you could get hold of a good claim that would pay a certain sum per week, wouldn't that be better than voyaging around the world on a speculation?"

The two adventurers had to admit that it would be.

"I feel quite sure of it," the girl asserted. "But, I must ride on. I wish you luck, and hope you'll strike something; but you will not unless the Lord performs a miracle in your behalf, which I doubt, for, as I have said, nobody has struck anything along this trail for a hundred miles."

"You won't fail to find me when you get into town, for I am the postmaster's daughter, and my name is Florence Cammerhan."

The girl rode on.

The prospectors looked at each other.

"I tell you what it is, she's a mighty handsome girl. I hope we will strike a job

in Red Rock Bar, for I shouldn't mind being located in a place where I could make up to such a girl as that."

Then they proceeded to prospect, but not a trace of the "auriferous" could they find.

"Oh, we might as well give it up!" Steve decided, "for we are only wasting our time here. We'll go right on to Red Rock Bar, and see what we can pick up there."

"I agree with you. This girl could have had no object in deceiving us, and only a couple of fools would expect to find the precious stuff where no one else had been able to do so."

They commenced to repack their tools on the burro, when along the trail came a dashing-looking horseman.

He was mounted upon a dark-brown American mare—a beast presenting a decided contrast to the undersized brute usually ridden in that locality.

He sported a handsome pair of cowboy boots, which reached above the knees. A stout pair of elegant pantaloons incased his lower limbs. An expensive woolen shirt protected his body. Over this he had a short riding-coat of black velveteen.

He was a handsome fellow, with clear, regular features, straight nose, piercing, dark-blue eyes, but, a strangely reserved look, like a person who was always in the habit of calculating.

He was fully armed, carrying holsters holding two revolvers, and an eight-inch bowie-knife.

But, the strangest part of his costume was his hat, which was soft woolen in texture, with a high crown and a broad, rolling brim, and in color was bright red.

Checking the speed of his mare as he came up, he inquired:

"How goes it, boys?"

"Nothing at all, sorry to say," Old Steve responded.

"You don't strike a color?"

"Not the shadow of one, so, as I told my noble friend here," and Steve nodded to Mountain Mark, "we had better trot right along to Red Rock Bar, where things are humming, as I am told, and everybody is making money."

"The best thing to do, I should say. I am a sport, and on my way to Red Rock Bar. My name is Richard Cunningham, but, from the fact that I have taken a fancy to wear this peculiar head-gear, the boys usually call me 'The Red Hat Sport,' without taking the trouble to add either Richard or Cunningham to it."

"Yes, the boys will indulge in such little tricks, sometimes," observed Mountain Mark.

"Ta, ta!" called out the horseman, as he gathered up his reins. "I will see you in Red Rock Bar, I reckon, if an earthquake don't upset the country before you get there," and off he went.

"There is a character for you," Old Steve remarked, as he tightened the last knot on the tools, "an' I misses my guess if we don't hear of that red hat again."

The Red Hat Sport galloped on at a goodly pace.

As he approached the town, everything gave evidence that prosperity reigned there.

The trail ran through a valley about twenty miles wide, and kept the center of it almost as regularly as if it had been laid out by man's cunning hand.

Along this trail ran a bright, brilliant mountain streamlet, and into this small river, as you might call it, came brooks, at intervals of every few miles.

These brooks ran up into the foot-hills, taking their rise in the mountain chains which paralleled the river.

The mountains were capped with little, funny peaks, broken up—a splendid gold and silver country.

But, the sport heeded not all this; he cared only for the gold and silver after it was out of the earth.

The trail was the main street of the town. Houses were located on both sides of it. Its water spread out very shallow, so the townsmen crossed by means of huge stones placed at intervals.

There were three of these "cross-overs"—one at the upper, middle, and lower end of the camp.

The horseman, riding into the corral of the hotel, put up his steed, then at once proceeded to one of the gambling tents, an annex of the hotel.

As he entered, he beheld an elegant "Black and Red" table, presided over by an extremely beautiful girl, dressed in crimson velvet, with magnificent diamonds glittering under the lamplight.

CHAPTER II.

THE LADY OF THE BLACK AND RED.

RED ROCK BAR was a booming town, and, like all mushroom towns, the houses were built out of the first thing that came handy, wood chiefly, and the "shebangs" were all quite small, for the timber of the neighborhood was not large.

Tents came next, of all sorts, shapes, and sizes; and then, as there were a few bluffs and hillsides in the vicinity, some citizens tunneled right into them, and so secured a dwelling place.

The Great Golden Eagle Hotel was the principal one in the place. It was one-story high; the main part was of wood, forty feet wide in front, and running back a hundred.

Then, from the building, at right angles, ran good sized tents—the front ones on the street being occupied as gambling-houses, or as places of business, while those in the rear were devoted to lodging the guests of the hotel.

Into this hostelry the Red Hat Sport made his way, and by accident selected the tent where the Black and Red game ran, presided over by the beautiful lady of the magnificent dress and splendid diamonds.

"Oho!" exclaimed the Sport as he entered, and made the lady a polite bow; "I am glad to see a Black and Red game, for it is one of the lay-outs that I particularly admire."

"I am pleased to hear you say that, sir," the lady responded, with her most winsome smile.

"I am a sportswoman myself, and, of all the games with which I am acquainted, I prefer *Rouge et Noir*, and I will tell you why—because the game is the fairest, both for the dealer and the player, of any that I know."

"My opinion, exactly," the Red Hat Sport replied. "If a man wants to pass away an hour pleasantly he can do so by trying his luck with the Black and Red. He will not be likely to lose much money, or gain enough to trouble him to carry it away."

Then the sport helped himself to a chair, bought ten dollars' worth of chips, and the game began.

"By the way, that's an odd-colored hat you wear," the lady remarked.

"Yes, it is rather stunning."

"You'll have to shuck it, or you'll get into trouble in this town."

"How so?"

"Because, there is another fellow here who has got one just like it."

A look of amazement, mixed with annoyance, appeared on the face of the gamester.

"I don't exactly understand," he remarked. "Is there a man in this town so big that he can remark to the rest of his fellow-creatures, 'I am going to wear a hat of such and such a color, and none of the rest of you must dare to wear one like it'?"

The lady laughed.

"Really, now, I don't think I ought to put it quite as strong as that. He takes a great deal of pride in it, and the boys around town have already nick-named him the Red Hat Sport, for that is his line of business."

"The same as my own," the new-comer responded.

"I suppose you will be able to settle the right to wear the crimson between you, but I'm afraid you'll have considerable trouble."

"Why? Is this Red Hat Sport an ugly customer?"

"Oh, no! He's like the average man of his class—nothing particular of the desperado about him."

"What is his name, by the way?"

"Herman Smokehouse."

"Smokehouse? Well, that is an odd appellation!"

"Yes, and I reckon it's his own, too—

which is more than can be said for the names of more than two-thirds of the people out in this country," and the lady indulged in a hearty laugh, in which the Sport joined.

"Hello! There goes my last chip! So, I reckon that will do for to-day. Ten dollars is a very nice introduction."

"Indeed it is!" the fair dealer answered. "I only wish half of my customers did nearly as well."

"Now then, miss, I'll have to trouble you to give me some pointers about the camp."

"Certainly; I shall be glad. If you are flush, put up at this hotel—dollar a day for a room with poor accommodations—cots with blankets, or, if crowded, buffaloc-robés right on the bare floor."

"Not very inviting accommodations for the money!"

"No, but it's the best to be had. There are half a dozen shanty-like hotels, with tent attachments, very dirty, for fifty cents a night; and then there are the dug-outs in the hills—free, gratis, for nothing."

"The only trouble about these dug-outs is that a man is obliged to walk a considerable distance to his lodging-place."

"But, how about the lodgings when you get there? Are they dry, so that a man can put in a good night's rest, in case of a rain-storm?"

"Yes, they are dry and very comfortable."

"Well, then, apart from the dignity of the affair, I think I should prefer the dug-outs to the others, although I am fairly well heeled, so far as money is concerned. Adieu! I will have the pleasure of seeing you again," and as he spoke he quitted the tent.

"Considering it's my first appearance in town, I must put up at the hotel, or else nobody will think I amount to anything."

Acting on this idea, the Red Hat Sport entered the main hotel and registered his name at the office and general reception-room.

Major Napoleon Nipkins was always on hand to receive his guests, and prided himself upon the cordial manner in which he always greeted his patrons.

"Glad to see you, my dear Mr. Cunningham! When did you arrive?"

"I am to stay with you for a week," the Red Hat Sport announced, with the hand-shaking. "Seven dollar room, please."

"All right!" and the landlord shoved the money into his pocket. "You'll have to shoot that hat, though."

"Another man got one like it?"

"Yes."

"Ugly cuss?"

"Well, rather!"

"On the kill bigger than a wolf?"

"I don't know much about that."

Then Cunningham turned, to come face to face with the other man with the red hat, who had appeared from behind the bar.

The men looked at the hats, and then at each other.

"Well, may I be hanged!" the second Red Hat man exclaimed. "This won't do at all, stranger! My name is Herman Smokehouse, and I own the only red hat in town. I am a sport by occupation, and it's going to be worth some money for the boys to designate me as the Red Hat Sport."

"You have stated my own case exactly," Cunningham asserted. "My chapeau was bought far to the north, and I certainly had no idea I should run into another red hat, in this camp."

"Durn me, if this ain't one of the queerest cases I ever had anything to do with. There can't be two red hats," Smokehouse declared, with an air of determination.

"Oh, I don't know about that. I don't see why the game can't be worked. When Red Rock Bar finds that there are two sports in tow, both wearing red hats, it will be safe to bet a pile of ducats that the people will soon distinguish one from the other."

"Maybe so, but I'd like to be sure of it."

"The thing can be arranged, of course, in the true gambler fashion," Cunningham suggested. "We are both fully armed; we can take a little walk out of town, and the man who comes back will be the 'Red Hat Sport,' while the other will be food for vultures."

"That is the good old sporting way of settling a point like this," declared the major, who was watching the proceedings with a

deal of interest; "but, somehow, that sort of thing has gone out of date. Those who resort to the revolver are at once waited upon by a committee, and told that their absence is more agreeable than their presence, so they have to go."

"I understand all about that," Smokehouse rejoined. "I am no revolver sharp, going around picking quarrels."

"Neither am I," Cunningham echoed. "I follow the sporting life because I think I can do better than in any other line, but I propose to be just as peaceable a citizen as though I was a grocer's clerk, or sat on a high stool in a banker's office."

"I tell you, gentlemen," asserted the pompous major, "there isn't any real way of settling a matter of this kind; it must be left to chance."

CHAPTER III.

DARK ADVICE.

FROM the hotel, after this interview between the two Sports, Smokehouse proceeded to a little saloon on the outskirts of the town, kept by a short, thick-set Irishman, named Micky O'Hanna, whose life Smokehouse had once saved. For which reason there wasn't anything Micky wouldn't do for the gambler.

The Irishman being married, kept house, so the gambler there found very comfortable quarters.

As there was no trade at this time of the day, no one was present; so the gambler lit his pipe and sat down in a corner to meditate over the situation.

Hardly had this been done when a friend of his, named Mark Webster, came in. This Webster was one of the leading gamesters of the town, but bore a "shady" reputation, for he was not thought to be "on the square."

"I've chased you from the Golden Eagle," Webster exclaimed, as he drew a chair up in the corner by Smokehouse. "I've heard all about this other Red Hat coming to town. There isn't room enough in this burgh for both of you, pardner. Either you've got to give up the hat or he has, and don't you make any mistake about it, either."

"The only thing about the matter is, that the fellow seems to be an extremely good-natured chap, and I really hate to go in to plug him," answered the Red Hat.

"You've got to do it, or else the whole town will say you've shown the white feather. You are now in possession, and you must hold it against all comers."

"You are right, by Jove! I shouldn't be able to hold up my head in the camp after."

"Now, we'd better settle this thing right up, and one or the other of the Red Hats must get out."

"That's the right way to put it," Smokehouse assented.

"Let me see:—there's going to be a bright moon to-night. I will be in the main Square, with my back to the flag-pole, at about nine o'clock; and I shall expect him to make his appearance there to defend his title to the Red Hat, within one half-hour of that time."

"That is the way to do the trick, and you can bet your sweet life that I'll do my share of it right up to the handle," Webster avowed.

He departed, and proceeded direct to the hotel to interview the other Red Hat Sport.

The citizens, suspecting that a hostile meeting would take place, were on the alert.

Webster, introducing himself in a polite way, explained his business and the appointment made. Cunningham apparently was prepared for the message.

"At nine o'clock, in the public Square, where the flag-pole stands?" he repeated.

Webster bowed politely at each reference.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"I will be on hand," Cunningham replied.

Webster made another polite bow and went away.

"You are in for it," the landlord remarked. "I reckoned it would come to a shooting-match, although I did my best to stave it off."

"That was merely a waste of time, my dear major. When these things have got to come, the quicker the better," and the Red Hat Sport strolled off in the direction of his room.

At the further end of the hallway a

young, good-looking fellow, whose gait showed that he was a cowboy, hastened up to him.

"I beg your pardon, Red Hat, but you are a stranger in this town, and you will need a little assistance in this affair, I reckon. My name is George Bentinct. I am an Englishman by birth—of good family, too; but that's neither here nor there. I'm doing a little cow punching, now, and seeing life on my own hook."

"Mr. Bentinct, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

The two men shook hands, heartily.

"But, I say, drop the 'mister,' call me either George, or Bentinct; don't stand on any formality."

"You need a second, and I'm just the man to fill the bill, I think."

"Thank you, George; I think you can. Come to my room and explain how these things are worked down in this section. I've been in a few scrapes of this kind, but customs differ in different localities."

Once in the room of the Red Hat, both took chairs; Cunningham produced cigars, and as they smoked they talked. Bentinct explained:

"In a fight of this kind, the challenger takes his place at the foot of the liberty-pole, revolvers in his hands. The other fellow comes up, asks him if he is ready. If he says yes, the other proceeds to go for him in every way that he knows how."

"Short and simple," said the new-comer.

"Yes; no fuss and feathers about it."

"I'll do my best to hold my end up, and I reckon I'll be able to do it, too."

To pass the time up to the hour set for the duel, the sport proposed that they should make a tour of the town, and took in the lady of the Black and Red, of course.

"Well, you've got your hands full of business, I should think," she observed.

"Yes; a man in my business must expect that sort of thing, you know!"

"You'll get the best of it, I opine, for I don't regard Smokehouse as being a dangerous man."

"All's well that ends well," returned the Sport, and about half-past eight that evening they made their way to the center of the camp, to find that all the inhabitants of Red Rock Bar had assembled on the spot.

The night was neither dark nor light; in fact, it was one of those uncertain nights, the worst that a man could have for such an affair.

"If either one of us hits the other to-night, it will be the result of chance rather than of calculation," Cunningham concluded.

The other party was fully as disgusted.

"What good is a man's skill on a night like this? If I wipe him out, it will only be dumb luck," Smokehouse said to Webster, as they stood at the foot of the flag-pole.

"Yes, and that reminds me, being here with you, I stand as much chance of getting soaked as you do, so I'll clear out, for it must be near nine," Webster said, as he glided away in the darkness.

The people of Red Rock Bar prided themselves upon being a go-ahead community, and so had got one of the bells which the old Spaniards had used in their chapels. For this bell they had built a little house, and the hours of six, twelve and nine were regularly struck; so, just as Smokehouse was speculating with regard to the hour, the old, sweet-toned mission bell came out softly, but distinctly, on the still night air.

"Now, then, where is he?" and the waiting Sport strained his eyes in every direction.

He could barely discern the people, grouped a hundred feet or so away, so dim was the light.

In a moment, however, a figure loomed up in the darkness, coming from the direction of the town, and halting about fifty feet away.

"Are you ready?" was called out in clear tones.

"There he is, and mighty glad I am to see him, too! Yes, all ready!" and Smokehouse immediately opened fire.

The flashes of the revolvers illuminated the atmosphere.

Fully a dozen shots were fired before there was any halt; then the guardian of the liberty-pole ceased to shoot.

It was evident he had been hit.

The bystanders had watched the proceed-

ings with almost breathless interest, and now that Smokehouse had ceased firing they did not run right up to see his condition, for they had a suspicion that this might be a trick on his part to get his rival to come within reach of his revolver, for a dead shot.

Loud were the calls, though, that rattled on the night air.

"How are ye, Smokehouse, old man?"

"Are you done for?"

"Has he succeeded in plugging you for keeps?"

"Sing out, and let us know how you are, pardner!"

No answer came, and so the people judged that Smokehouse had been seriously wounded, if not slain outright.

About a dozen of the miners, who had lanterns, hastened toward the flag-pole.

Smokehouse had received three bullets, as could be seen from the blood flowing from three wounds.

As it happened, there was a doctor in the assemblage, and he hastened to make an examination.

Paddy Murphy, the red-whiskered "saw-bones," was a jolly good fellow, and an excellent physician when he wasn't drunk.

On this occasion he was sober. Lucky for Smokehouse!

"He's got one pretty serious wound in the lung, here. I can't tell much of anything about it, though, until I get a chance to strip him. The other two, one in the wrist and one in the shoulder, do not amount to much.

"Fit up some sort of conveyance and get him to his cabin as soon as possible. The quicker I can get to work at his injuries the better 'twill be for him!"

It was but a few moments later when Micky O'Hanna appeared on the scene. He had come with an extemporized stretcher to carry his friend away.

"Oh, begorrah, begorrah! to think that the best b'y in ahl the town should be afther bein' kilt intoirely by a murtherin' bit av a stranger, that nobody knows anything about, at all, at all!" he lamented.

"It's the fortune of war, Micky," said the doctor.

CHAPTER IV.

A QUEER CLAIMANT.

WE must go back two days, from the one on which occurred the fight at the foot of the liberty-pole.

The postmaster was waiting for the arrival of the mail. The stage had not found it profitable to make more than four trips a week, thus far; but all the same the mail came in and went out in first-class United States style, leather bag, with all sorts of locks and jingles upon it.

But, after the mail bag got into the hands of the postmaster, one Michael Cammerhan, the glories of the establishment greatly diminished, for the rest of the post-office consisted of a soap-box, into which the mail was unceremoniously dumped.

If Mr. John P. P. Smith made his appearance and asked if there was any mail for him, the soap-box was placed before him, and he was told to see for himself.

"For I really haven't had time to go through the blame thing myself, to-day," Michael would explain.

His store had taken all his time and attention.

On this morning of which we write, a surprise awaited the storekeeper postmaster, for there was a letter for him, directed in a strange, crooked hand.

"Upon my word! I must say that is about the ugliest fist I ever saw!" Michael averred.

The letter was brief, but to the point. It read:

"SIR—My cousin, Abraham Muckajack, died in your town a few weeks ago.

"This is to inform you that I am the said Abraham Muckajack's sole heir, and therefore shall hold you responsible for the disposal of his property, which, I am informed, amounts to a large sum, consisting as it does of a fine dwelling house in the town of Red Rock Bar, and a valuable mine in the outlying valley, known as Dead Man's Gulch. Also a claim in a rich mine situated somewhere in the north; place to me unknown.

"I shall arrive by the next stage.

"JABEZ MUCKAJACK."

Cammerhan laid this letter down upon the counter, leaned back against the shelves and indulged in a perfect roar of laughter.

Quite a little crowd had gathered, and as they happened to be old citizens, and well acquainted with Mr. Abraham Muckajack, they all appreciated the situation.

"Now, boys, I wish I may die if this isn't the richest joke that has struck this town in a dog's age!"

"That's so!" assented the nearest man, and then they all roared again.

The postmaster picked up the letter and glanced over it.

"A fine dwelling-house," he repeated, "ho! ho! ho! But I say, boys," and the storekeeper glanced at the end of the letter, "what do you suppose he means by this 'valuable claim in the north,' as he calls it?"

The miners looked at each other and all shook their heads.

"I never heard that Muckajack had such a thing," Michael continued, "and I reckon we would have heard enough about it, for he was a great fellow to play his own bazoo on a Saturday night when he had cleaned up his week's work."

"Yes, and got five or six drinks into him," one of the miners remarked. "More than that he never took, for he didn't drink with anybody if he could help himself."

"I reckon ther'll be some fun when this fellow arrives," the postmaster decided.

The next stage was due at five in the afternoon, and as the news of the promised arrival of this particular tenderfoot had circulated pretty widely, all over the town, quite a large number of citizens had assembled to greet the hack.

It proved to be full of passengers, and Mr. Jabez Muckajack was the last to get out.

Everybody in the crowd knew him without an introduction. He was a tall, thin man, rawboned, with a coat much too big for him, a pair of pantaloons of the same description, and an old fashioned silk hat.

He carried a silk umbrella, fully as old-fashioned as his tile.

He looked neither to the right nor the left, but marched directly into the hotel, where he arranged with Major Napoleon for accommodations.

"Where will I find the post-office?" he inquired.

"About a block down the street."

At which he departed, going directly to the establishment of Michael Cammerhan.

As he went straight on, he never noticed that he had a small procession at his heels when he entered Cammerhan's store.

"You are the postmaster?" the long, lean and lank man demanded as he entered.

"Yes, sir," answered Michael, promptly.

"You got a letter from me, recently—Jabez Muckajack?"

"I did, sir."

"Well, I am here, as I wrote you," and the speaker looked around with an air which seemed to say—"Now that I am here, give me my property as soon as possible."

"My dear sir," said the postmaster, as he took Muckajack's letter from his pocket, "it is evident you do not understand how we do business in these far-western towns, which have not yet arrived at the dignity of a local government."

"I understand that the postmaster generally runs the town," Muckajack replied.

"To a certain extent that is correct, but he doesn't run everything. Take the case of your cousin, for an instance: he died suddenly; had no relatives in the town; his eastern or western address was not known; so his friends could not be reached.

"In such a case we collect all his valuables, put them up and sell them at auction. With the money realized we pay his debts, put the rest of it in an envelope and keep it for a year. If no heir turns up within that time, we cover it into the town treasury, and that ends the matter."

"Quite right!" exclaimed Muckajack, sticking his umbrella under an arm and rubbing his hands gleefully, "but the year has not expired, and I, the sole heir, am here to claim the estate."

"It is yours, sir, after you produce the proper proof in regard to your identity and right as sole heir."

"That I can easily do," and Muckajack proceeded to open his coat to get at his papers.

"Hold on, a moment, my dear sir," the postmaster enjoined, laying his hand gently on the arm of the stranger. "I think you are laboring under a misapprehension with regard to the value of this estate. S'pose you come with me and I'll show you just what it consisted of."

"Well, if you care to take the trouble," Muckajack assented, with a look of suspicion upon his thin, foxy-like face.

"No trouble," replied the postmaster, and he conducted the stranger to a leaky dug-out on the outskirts of the town, a regular procession following in the rear, for a large number of the miners were anxious to see the fun.

"This is the fine dwelling-house," the postmaster announced, with a wave of his hand toward the dug-out.

"You don't mean it!" cried Muckajack in disgust.

"Yes," and, as he spoke, the postmaster drew a legal-like looking document from his breast pocket. "Here is a list of the contents found in the dwelling on the demise of your relative, sir."

At which the crowd snickered.

"And the amount which each article realized at auction: One frying-pan, ten cents; knife and fork, ten cents; two spoons, ten cents; three tin plates, fifteen cents."

"What the deuce do you suppose I care about this trumpery stuff?" Muckajack exclaimed in strong disgust.

"Really, sir, I can't say," the postmaster replied, grave as a judge.

"Take me to the real property—take me to something that amounts to something—take me to the mine! Upon my word, sir, you seem to be making game of me!"

"Oh, no! I'm giving it to you straight as a string! But, come along; we'll wind up the business quickly enough."

The stranger was then conducted to the miserable little claim, up in Dead Man's Gulch.

"This was your cousin's mine, and, at open auction, it fetched twenty-five dollars. But, here is the owner now!" Cammerhan exclaimed, as a seedy little miner made his appearance.

"I reckon he ain't overly proud of his bargain, either. What will you take for the outfit, John?"

"Thirty dollars, and it's worth that, too."

"But, this valuable claim in a mine to the north?" Muckajack asked, anxiously.

"Now, stranger, you have got me," the postmaster replied. "I never heard of such a claim, and I reckon nobody else here ever heard of it."

"Hey, boys! Did any of you ever hear that Muckajack owned a claim in any of the northern gulches?"

Everybody shook his head.

"I reckon he doesn't own no claim," said an old gray-beard, "for I most certainly would have heard of it, as Abe and I were intimate, and used to swap lies together by the hour. If he had any interest in any claim, good for anything at all, you can bet your life he would have blowed enough to me about it. But, I never heard a word of it before this day."

"Where are the papers kept, relating to mining property, by the owners generally?" Muckajack asked.

"In the safe in the Express Office," the postmaster answered. "They are sealed up in an envelope and locked up for safe keeping, then opened in presence of witnesses."

CHAPTER V.

THE EXPRESS AGENT.

"I THINK I will have to go and see the gentleman in charge of the Express Office," Muckajack at once decided. "It is important I should know what property he has in his care."

"You will find Wash Alexander a fine fellow," the postmaster encouraged, so Muckajack started for the Express Office.

"I must bring this foolishness to an end," he muttered. "They're trying to rob me of my property, but they sha'n't do it."

The Express agent was busy behind the counter attending to his duties when Muckajack entered at the head of the procession, which still kept at his heels.

"My name is Jabez Muckajack," was the stranger's curt salutation.

"Any relation to the Muckajack who died here a short time ago?" asked Alexander.

"Yes, and I understand that you have his private papers."

"Correct—relative to a dug-out, and a small claim in Dead Man's Gulch."

"And the big mine up in the Northwest—the valuable property?" Muckajack supplemented.

"No such papers here; some one has been fooling you, old man."

"Yes; it really begins to look that way; but I'm much obliged to you, gentlemen; it isn't your fault," and then Muckajack departed.

The incoming of the stage-coach, on its return trip, now commanded the attention of the crowd, and so Muckajack was no longer under surveillance.

After the coach had departed, a short, thick-set, well-dressed stranger, but with a peculiar, hatchet-like face, followed the landlord, and, as Major Napoleon Nipkins turned, he came face to face with the new-comer.

He started in surprise.

"Why, Mr. Muckajack, when did you get in?"

"Hello! How did you know my name?"

"Knew you by your close resemblance to Mr. Jabez Muckajack. He arrived by stage, this afternoon."

"I came over on foot, as I am a bit of a prospector, and wanted to see for myself what the country was like."

"Well, your relative—"

"My cousin," the stranger explained.

"He's been making it pretty lively for us here, looking up the property left by the dead Muckajack."

"And the big property at the Northwest—the big mine, eh?"

"Why, Muckajack never left any such property! I tell you what you'd better do—go and see your relative; you'll find him in his room, and he'll explain the whole thing to you. Come along with me."

Then the major conducted the stranger to the room of the other Muckajack, where the two were seemingly much astonished to see each other.

The cousins shook hands warmly, after the landlord had retired.

"Why, Jonathan, you are the last man I expected to see. I haven't heard of you for twenty years past!" Jabez exclaimed.

"Ah, my dear cousin, it takes the scent of money to bring long-separated relatives together."

"Yes, this big mine up in the Northwest, for instance," Jabez suggested.

"But none of these men here will admit that it exists," Jonathan observed, deprecatingly.

"But it does, though, all the same," insisted the other.

"Certainly! No doubt whatever about it."

"It's a second bonanza, I'm sure, and some scoundrels in some way have managed to get hold of the papers, and so defraud us—the true heirs."

"We must play detective. We must outwit these schemers. Never shall it be said that the Muckajacks were outwitted by a few ordinary Western sharps. How are you off for cash?"

"I am fairly well fixed," Jabez replied. "Snug business which pays me a good income."

"I am situated in exactly the same manner," the other averred, "and so can afford to devote my entire time to hunting down these rascals who have seized upon our inheritance."

"Gentlemen, permit me to offer you my assistance!"

The Muckajacks jumped as though a canon had exploded in the room.

From under the bed came a tall, gaunt fellow, dressed in a society black suit, and wearing a silk hat which had seen far better days.

"Allow me to offer you my card!" and he read the superscription as he rendered it: "Lycurgus Dentatious, Attorney-at-law. Also, Chief Detective for the Western States."

"In a case of this kind, my dear sirs, you don't stand the ghost of a show, so long as you depend upon your own unaided efforts.

You must secure a man like myself—one who knows these villains, these snakes in the grass, these wolves of rapine, these double-distilled rascals who make it their business to prey upon honest men!

"I was personally acquainted with your Cousin Abraham, and so am aware of what a peculiarly keen business man he was," the self styled detective explained.

"He was one of those men who kept his affairs to himself, and not until he had completed his business in regret of the great bonanza to the Northwest, would he be apt to allow anybody to know aught about it."

"Yes, that was Abraham to a hair," Jabez declared.

"Abraham was a deep fellow," the other cousin added, with a wise shake of the head.

"Now then, gentlemen, let us sit down and arrange a plan of operations," the detective suggested, taking the initiative as if by right.

The three helped themselves to chairs.

"Now, what makes me sure that there is big money in this affair," the detective assumed, "is this fact: I was up in the northern gulches about the time this deal was taking place, and I heard whispers in regard to just such a transaction; but, of course, as in all such momentous deals, the parties interested did their best to keep the matter quiet."

"And they did keep it quiet, the infernal scoundrels!" Jabez exclaimed.

"Calm yourself, my dear Mr. Muckajack!" the detective urged, "so, now it is highly necessary that we proceed with cool heads."

To which the cousins assented.

"Neither of you have been up through this country?"

The Muckajacks shook their heads.

"That is a valuable point in our favor, for we will be able to work in the dark, and to do so you two gentlemen must disguise yourselves as stockmen, looking for a range."

"We can do that easily enough," Jabez assured, "for I have done a deal of business in buying and selling live stock, and am posted in all the points of the trade."

"That is fortunate," the detective assented, "for it must not be suspected that we are anything but just what we appear to be."

"I will take the case on reasonable terms, because I know there is a fortune in it. One hundred dollars advance retainer, five per cent on the amount recovered, unless, of course, it goes up into the hundred thousands; then I would be content to take a good deal less money."

The Muckajacks expressed satisfaction at this arrangement, and at once each one counted out fifty dollars, which the detective received with the air of a man used to handling his thousands.

"Much obliged, gentlemen!" he said. "I accept your retainer. Rest assured I will give you good value for it."

"And now let me account for the manner in which I made my entrance into your presence. I am after a distinguished criminal, for whom a large reward is offered, and I got wind of the fact that he and a pal were going to meet in this very apartment, so I hid under the bed in order to be able to nab my man."

Which explanation seemed a perfectly satisfactory one, and the cousins said as much.

The stage for the north connected with the one from the south, and did not go out until the other came in; therefore they had three days to wait before they could take more decided action.

During that interval the detective proved himself to be not only a good judge of character, but an expert on whisky, as well.

He did not actually get drunk, but so precious near it that he kept the Muckajacks on the alert all the time.

"You mustn't mind my h'listing a little bug-juice, gentlemen," he protested. "A lawyer and a detective whose business lines are cast in these regions must be a genial galoot, hail-fellow-well-met with every ordinary, two-cent, no-account cuss that he may happen to run across. But don't you be afraid about my holding my end up, for I can do that every time!"

Hardly had the detective made this explanation when a little incident happened that proved he was no mere boaster.

A cowboy in the place, half drunk, had been watching the odd-looking detective for some time, and finally concluding that he was just the sort of fellow to have some sport with, swaggered up to him and slapped him on the back, exclaimed:

"How are ye, old cuss?"

CHAPTER VI.

A SURPRISED PUNCHER.

The detective turned slowly, retreated a couple of steps, felt first in one breast pocket then in the other, and finally, from one of his pistol-pockets, fished out a pair of spectacles.

These he opened with due deliberation, affixed them on his nose, surveyed the cowboy with a prolonged stare, and asked:

"Did you speak to me, sir?"

By this time every eye in the saloon had been attracted to the group, and every face was agrin, for fun was anticipated.

"Yes, I spoke to you. Who else should I speak to?" the cowboy retorted in an insolent way.

"But it don't seem to me that I've ever had the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"Well, I don't reckon that you have, but that's easiliy fixed. My name is Dan Shelby, and I'm the boss cow-puncher from the Short Horn Rocker Range.

"I'm the bugle-boy from the upper Missouri, and when I come to town for a little fun, I generally succeed in getting it."

Then he snapped his fingers in the air and began to execute a dance.

It was a ceremonial affair, at first, in which he took slow steps, bowing gravely to everybody within sight; then he went off into a sort of whirl, at the end of which he indulged in a high-kick, which ended the performance.

"That's the sort of man I am! Now, then, I propose that this fascinating old rooster join me in a *pas de gras*, wherein we will give an exhibition of high-kicking which will be an astonisher to the inhabitants of this blessed burgh!"

"Well, if this don't beat my time! I have seen some fresh galoots, but you are certainly ahead of the deck," said the astonished detective.

"Who are you calling fresh?"

"I'm calling you fresh," the detective retorted, "and you deserve the name, too, if ever a man did. But, I'm not going to have you fooling around me, so trot off, youngster, and find some other game to monkey with."

The cowboy, amazed at this plain speaking, cried:

"I reckon I'll have to give you a slight testimony in regard to the kind of man I am," and reached forward with the evident intention of pulling the nose of the "old rooster," but the right fist of the detective shot out with the force of a piston, catching the cowboy between the eyes and flooring him as if he had been shot.

A yell of amazement broke from the by-standers.

"What sort of critters do you call these things, anyway?" Lycurgus Dentatious asked, as he pointed contemptuously at the fallen man. "Is this the kind of thing you raise for fighting-men?"

"Oh, no," the landlord replied; "he just drifted in from the range."

Although the cowboy was a stranger, there were plenty to go to his assistance and help him get on his pegs again.

He proved to be game, and not at all satisfied to call it "quits" with that opening lesson.

"Maybe you think you've got me licked, pardner, but I can teach ye the difference in a holy hurry!" he cried, as he squared off in fairly good shape.

"Say, you fellows, you can't do any more scrapping in here!" the saloonkeeper exclaimed. "You must go outside, where you can have all the fun you want."

"Come along!" cried the detective. "You haven't got your full allowance, yet, and you might as well get it to-night as any other time."

Then he marched out into the open air, followed by the cowboy and the crowd.

The fight was not a long one, for the detective, with his long, monkey-like arms, and knowledge of the boxer's art, knocked the other fellow around about as he pleased, and, after a couple of knock-downs, the cowboy concluded he had got about all he wanted, and so "the scrap" came to an end.

All hands went back into the saloon, where the cowboy was made to "stand treat," and, while this necessary ceremony was transpiring, we will take our readers to the bedside of the wounded Red Hat Sport.

The doctor had just finished dressing the wounds of the injured man, and departed, leaving behind him the assurance that in a couple of weeks the Sport would be as good as new.

"Bad 'cess to the murtherin' blaggaird!" cried the Irishman. "Couldn't he do any better for us than that? Two wakes, indade!"

"Oh, that's all right, Micky. We want the truth, and nothing but the truth. But, I say, lad: if Cunningham got the best of the first game, the thing has got to be fought out to the death!" Smokehouse avowed. "And yet I can just tell you, Micky, that I have a presentiment I'm going to get the worst of it!"

"Arrah, me b'y! ye mustn't yield to such apprehensions av bad luck, faith! True, a worse bit av bad luck could hardly have happened ye, but console yerself, me jewel, that it will be your luck nixt toime!"

At this point the gambler, Mark Webster, made his appearance.

"The wife told me to come right up," he explained.

"That's all roight! Now ye can take care av him for a whoile, since I want to go up-town mesel'."

The Irishman retreated, and Webster took a seat at the bedside.

"I met the doctor coming up the street."

"You know then how I'm situated."

"Yes, it's a bad lookout, for I fancy you haven't any more money than you know what to do with, pardner."

"Of course, I'm all right here with Micky," Smokehouse asserted, "but, if I saw an opportunity to turn a trick when I get up again, I'd jump at it, no matter what it was."

Webster rose from his seat, carefully examined the den, to make sure nobody was within hearing, then resumed his seat and said in Smokehouse's ear:

"I think I have got track of a game that will pan out ten or fifteen thousand dollars, if you care to go into it when you are all right again."

"Does it depend upon me?" the wounded Sport asked.

"Yes; to a certain extent. You used to be in the Express Company's employ?"

"Yes, but the company got down on me, and I was fired."

"They are going to send out an extra coach to-morrow night," Webster said. "I've got this from Jack, the hostler, who has gone in with me."

"The coach does not leave here until twelve, midnight. What does that mean, old man?"

"That it carries treasure, and they hope to jump it through before any one can learn that they have any such idea in their heads."

"That is my interpretation," Webster observed.

"But, I say, Webster, what do you want with me in this transaction—what good can I be to you?"

"I'll be honest with you, Smokehouse," Webster answered. "The boys connected with the company say there isn't a lock about the establishment you can't open if you want to."

"The money is going to be carried in that small safe. To a regular cracksman that safe wouldn't offer any obstacle at all, but, to me, it would be a great deal, and the chances are that I couldn't get inside of it at all."

"It is a stout little safe, and I don't believe a man like yourself, without experience in that line, could succeed in cracking it."

Webster gave a long breath, which lacked little of being a genuine sigh. Just then it seemed a case of "so near, and yet so far!"

"Curse that other Red Hat!" he exploded, with vicious emphasis. "It's the chance of a lifetime, and here you are lying on the flat of your back, just when you ought to be—I say pardner!"

"Well, old fellow?"

"What if we were to turn the trick, after the old fashion, then fetch the safe here to you? Couldn't that be worked?"

Smokehouse shook his head slowly, but like one who flatly declines to give the suggestion a second thought.

"That would never do, Mark. Careful as you might be, you would almost surely leave some sign which keen eyes could read, and then—a hasty skip, or go up a tree!"

The gambler scowled darkly, and for a brief space sat in moody silence. Then he lifted his eyes, with a short, grim nod before saying:

"Well, it's too mighty good a chance to let go by unimproved, and so—reckon we'll have to hold up the stage and *cache* the safe until you are able to get about, Smokehouse."

The wounded sport made no comment, at once. In his turn he seemed pondering the situation deeply, and noting this, the gambler held his peace, hoping even yet that his friend could present a more feasible method of winning the coveted treasure than any which had yet occurred to his busy brain.

After a few minutes Smokehouse spoke, slowly, almost like a man talking to himself.

"If I was as badly off as Doc tries to make out, it'd be simple folly in even thinking of playing a hand in such a game; but I'm a long ways from being a dead man, pardner!"

"Of course; but you're a long ways from being a sound man, too!"

"That's right, too! And yet, if I simply had to, reckon I could put one foot ahead of the other, and that right peart!"

"What! You surely can't mean—"

"I mean just this, Webster!" and as he spoke the Red Hat Sport bent a bit nearer the excited gambler. "I mean that I've hit on a plan worth two of any you've proposed, so far."

"In what way?"

"Like this: I'll go along and crack the safe, if you and Black Jack will do your share of the job."

"Of course we will, but how do you mean?"

"Well, of course I couldn't walk that far on my own legs, nor could I stand it to ride a horse; but I can go in a chair, or on a litter, if you fellows are game enough to do the toting!"

Webster seemed amazed for the next few seconds, and Smokehouse added a bit more light:

"If you can tote me that far, I'll crack the safe, and we'll all come back with the hearse. You can drop me in here, and as Doc Murphy will swear I'm surely bedfast, no suspicion can come my way, even with my supposed knowledge of the safe and its fastenings. See?"

"But there's Micky: wouldn't he smell a rat?"

"I'll answer for O'Hanna, with my life if need be."

CHAPTER VII.

HOLDING UP THE TREASURE STAGE.

MICKY O'HANNA was hardly doing a flourishing business of late, so far as his saloon was concerned, and his patrons were few in number as they surely were lean in purse on this momentous evening.

Still, what they lacked in numbers they made up in noise, and however little that might be to the liking of an invalid in general, just now Herman Smokehouse felt really grateful to the fellows, since there was less danger of those overhead movements attracting attention.

Mark Webster and Black Jack, the hostler, were promptly on time, and duly prepared to carry out their portion of the contract made.

The wounded Red Hat Sport was already seated in a wooden arm-chair, and without a word he signed his confederates to pick him up bodily and get clear of the house.

"Mick's holding the bar, as we saw before coming in," whispered the gambler, with a

half-nervous glance around that dingy room, "but where's Biddy and the brats?"

"Sent out of the way, where neither eyes nor tongues can work us harm," quickly answered Smokehouse. "Come, there's no time to waste!"

Silenced if not satisfied, Webster bent to his task, and the wounded Sport was borne out of the chamber, down the narrow flight of stairs to the rear of the building.

There was no mishap, no interruption. The noise from the saloon at the front was amply sufficient to drown such sounds as were unavoidably made by the two men, and then their breath came freely as they found themselves out beneath the twinkling stars, with the most difficult if not most dangerous portion of their task performed.

After this their progress was far more rapid, and having won fairly clear of the O'Hanna abode, the awkward chair was abandoned in favor of a fairly comfortable litter for the rest of the journey.

But few words were spoken until the town was left fairly behind them, and then the adventurous trio merely talked in whispers while making brief halts for rest and breathing purposes.

The first of these halts was utilized by Mark Webster in assuring himself that the little Irishman had not been let into their risky secret.

"Of course I never told him," asserted the Red Hat Sport. "Not that I would hesitate to trust him, though, for Micky's clean white, and takes my lightest word for both law and Gospel."

"All the same, I'm mighty glad you never faced your cards, pardner."

"As I said, I didn't have to. I merely told Micky to ship the old woman and her kids for the night, and to bluff off any of the boys who might take a fancy to drop in on me, this evening. I wanted to sleep, in peace and quiet; understand?"

"Still, he may suspect, when the trick has been turned."

"That suspicion will never turn our way, unless I give him permission, though," confidently declared the Sport; then adding with a touch of impatience: "Get a move on, now! Save your breath for Single Mile Run, for my legs are of no use there!"

Now fairly satisfied that matters were working wholly in their favor, neither Webster nor Black murmured against the unusual work which fell to their share, and with barely a few minutes spent in taking breath by the way, that long and trying slope was surmounted, and the three bold schemers finally reached the point upon which they had settled as the most suitable for their purpose.

Herman Smokehouse left his litter with a degree of activity which caused Webster to open his eyes widely, and to wonder if they had not been imposed upon by the Red Hat Sport.

"Money makes the mare go, and it's the scent of gold that lends a bit of life to even my poor legs," the wounded man said, with a brief, low chuckle, evidently divining something of those thoughts.

"Pity it didn't begin to take effect before! Down at the foot of the Run, for instance!"

"Better hope that 'twill hold out until we've turned the trick and covered over our tracks," gravely retorted Smokehouse, leaning against a tall rock beside the stage-trail, then producing a small package from his bosom.

A few swift movements, then he pushed back the brim of his hat, facing his comrades more squarely, then speaking:

"What do you think of it, gentlemen?"

Both uttered low exclamation, of surprise; and Mark Webster even let a hand drop to the ready butt of a revolver as he gazed; for it seemed as though that other Red Hat Sport, Richard Cunningham, stood in the starlight before them.

With the heavy mustache which Herman Smokehouse wore, now blended a full beard, dark and glossy, giving his face a really startling resemblance to that of his rival.

"Just to make it a bit more binding in case the driver or Old Poter should retain wit enough to take mental notes, you see," observed the Red Hat Sport, with another subdued laugh. "Not that I mean to show up any plainer than I have to, but—"

"Let 'em see enough to swear to him, and

then we'll help pull the rope!" eagerly cried the gambler, with a vicious gesture.

But Smokehouse shook his head, decided-
ly.

"Not if I can help it, and that's why I made you bring the lariats. We must leave the whole affair an utter mystery, if possible. Give them the faintest clue, and they'll surely follow the trail to the bitter end. I know what these Express-detectives can do, even if you've had no experience with them, Webster. So—we'll jolt the lads so mighty hard they'll never know what touched them!"

"Fix 'em for the boneyard, you mean?"

"No, not unless we have to go to such extremes in order to protect our own necks. But they mustn't have time granted for counting us, much less recognition."

Slouching the broad leaf of his crimson hat over his brows once more, Smokehouse left the stage road for the cover where they were to perfect their ambuscade, moving slowly, stiffly, plainly showing the effects of the lead poured into him while vainly striving to hold the liberty-pole against his rival.

Everything went to prove his utter unfitness, from a physical point of view, but his grit and nerve were truly remarkable, and if failure was to come, it certainly would not come through his agency.

Gathered together there where they could fully command the road, the three desperadoes talked in subdued tones. Black Jack and the gambler nervously working their jaws, but the Red Hat taking his tobacco in the shape of a cigar, wasting more than one match in his efforts to keep the weed alight: a fact which was fated to be recalled after anything but an agreeable fashion in the days to come.

Meanwhile, affairs went on in town as usual. No one seemed to suspect that the Express Company was going to make a night drive.

The coach got off at midnight, a good driver on the box. Old Potter was seated beside him, with his double-barreled shot-gun heavily charged with buckshot.

Out of town they went, up the long trail leading down into the camp.

This brought them to the bend in the road, and then into Single Mile Run, as that long slope was locally termed.

At the head of this Run the horses were considerably "blown," and as a rule the whip was of more service than the reins, just there; but just as the team was slackening up for the customary breathing spell, a hoarse, stern voice broke forth with the ever-thrilling challenge:

"Hands up, or die!"

The driver gave a short cry at this, and instinctively tightened the ribbons, at the same time feeling for the brake-jaw with his foot; but Old Potter seemed made of sterner stuff, for swift as thought itself his short gun flew up to explode with a heavy, lumbering report, its lurid glare giving a momentary glimpse of a crouching, shrinking shape just at the head of the road.

Before he could cock his second barrel, however, a rope shot through the air, and after smiting him sharply across the face, closed about his throat and one shoulder, then plucked him headlong off the box seat.

At the same instant a second lariat claimed the driver as its prey, and the two men took that awkward tumble in close company, their cries of angry dismay being well-nigh drowned by the explosion of that second barrel, the contents of which rattled viciously among the rocks above the road level.

With a cat-like bound a dark shape was fairly upon the falling men, striking viciously as it came. The blows sounded dull and sodden, but they required no repetition.

"Look to the dogs!" harshly exclaimed the Red Hat Sport, as he fell back, shifting his revolver to his weakened member as he used its mate to check the frightened horses. "Lively! I'm not to—take the horses, Jack!"

The hostler was prompt to obey, and as those practiced hands gripped the bits, Smokehouse staggered back until he found support against a rock by the roadside.

His sudden movements and violent actions were almost too much for him in his present weakened condition; but his work

had been thoroughly done, and his aid was no longer essential, just then.

Finding both driver and guard senseless, Mark Webster quickly bound and gagged them, then drew back, to say:

"Shall we pull out, now, pardner? Or—wouldn't it be worth while to wait just long enough for one or both of these galoots to glimpse your make-up? They'd be proud to drop a little spider into Richard's dump-ing, I fancy!"

But Smokehouse shook his head positively while crossing over to the treasure-coach.

"Not now, man; I was merely guarding against accidents. He might be able to prove an *alibi*, and that would turn suspicion my way. So—let well enough alone!"

He entered the stage, holding the door ajar while adding:

"Leave those fellows right where they are. You get on the box with Black Jack, and follow the route already marked out."

"And you? The gold—"

"Will be ready by the time you're ready for it, never worry," the Red Hat Sport asserted, closing and fastening the door. "Go on! We want plenty of time for covering our tracks, and the town is fast asleep ere this: go on, I say!"

Webster and Black Jack mounted to the box: the horses were turned, and then the back trail for Red Rock Bar was taken.

To all seeming the town was buried in peaceful slumber, and with all fears set at rest on that score, the stage was driven direct, and with as little noise as possible, to the Express Company's stables.

The Red Hat Sport opened the door as the stage halted, and when Mark Webster eagerly sprung to his side, he gruffly anticipated all questions, by muttering:

"It's all right; look on the back seat, will you!"

The gambler gave a quick breath as he caught sight of the little sacks in which the treasure had been packed for transportation.

Stepping out of the stage, the wounded Sport took command of their further proceedings.

"Take the gold only," he commanded, pointing to the selected sacks on the cushioned seats. "I have it all ready for you."

He was greedily obeyed, and when all was secured, the Red Hat Sport led the way to an ash-barrel, which, with a dozen others, stood under a tree not far from the company's stables.

One barrel, away at the back, was only half full.

"Drop the bags into this barrel," was the order given.

This was soon done; then the Red Hat Sport emptied some of the ashes from another barrel upon the bags, until they were covered.

"There; this is a *cache* which, I fancy, will baffle detection," he announced, with a grim chuckle.

No sooner was this, the most important part of the entire job, completed, than Smokehouse bade Webster finish his work, and the gambler made two or three turns with the horses in the neighborhood, as the regular drivers were accustomed to do at the end of a trip, then led the team to the stable doors, where they were left to themselves, to stand throughout the rest of the night.

Not until all this was performed to his satisfaction did Herman Smokehouse show any signs of leaving that vicinity; but then he staggered perceptibly as he turned face in the direction of Micky O'Hanna's place.

Now that the worst of the nerve-strain was past, he began to show the effects of his exertions, and only through the aid of the gambler was he able to regain his chamber.

This was done without meeting any person, and sinking upon his bed with a faint sigh of lassitude, the Red Hat Sport faintly muttered:

"Go now, pardner! I'll be all right, in the morning. I've got the sinews of war with which to fight Cunningham, and I must get well to play even. This town's all too small for both of us!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A RIDDLE WRITTEN IN RED.

The town of Red Rock Bar slept soundly until its usual hour of rising—about five o'clock at that time of year—when the discovery of the empty hack was made.

For reasons which were entirely satisfactory to himself, Black Jack, as John Tudor was more familiarly known, took pains to be the man who first sent that electric thrill through the camp: but, after the first wildly excited cries saluted the fresh air of early morning, the tidings ran like wildfire throughout Red Rock Bar.

With wondrous celerity a crowd gathered near the stables owned by the Express Company, where the driverless "extra" was standing, the ground deeply scored just there by the hoofs of the impatient horses.

This alone was sufficient proof that the rig had been standing there for a considerable length of time, and, though no one could give any definite reasons for their belief, that belief was pretty general that a robbery had taken place.

Word was quickly sent to the place where Washington Alexander, the Express agent, boarded, and that worthy came back at a run, completing his dressing in the open air.

Taking in the situation at a single glance, his strong face showing an unusual pallor, Alexander spoke:

"Who was first to make this discovery?"

"Me, boss," avowed Black Jack, coming to the front and giving an awkward salute with hand and frowsy forelock. "I jest turned out, ye see, sir, an' then—"

"Did you touch anything about the coach?"

"No, sir, I never didn't."

"Has anything been touched, then?" persisted the Express agent, flashing a keen glance around over the assembly.

A negative answer was unanimous, and one gray-beard added:

"We reckoned mebbe we hadn't best, Wash, afore you'd come to take a 'ventory, like."

"Who was driving, anyway?"

"What called for the extra, pardner?"

A score of excited queries poured in upon the pale-faced agent, but, in place of answering any of these, Alexander called to a number of men employed about the stables, and other property of the Express Company, bidding them act as guards for the time being.

Opening the door on the side nearest him, the agent frowned a bit as he saw the little steel safe now in full view, just as though those sent in charge of the treasure had been about to take it from the stage into the office, its important mission fulfilled for that time.

We know better than that, however, although to a casual glance the safe itself appeared to have suffered no harsh treatment.

There were no signs of explosives having been used, nor any scars such as would surely follow brute force; yet, even before he reached out a hand to grip the knob, Washington Alexander felt morally certain that he would find naught but an empty treasure-case.

And so it proved to be. The interior was empty, the precious freight missing!

Alexander briefly made known the bare facts: a quantity of gold had been sent out on a night-run, the company hoping thereby to avoid all danger of a "hold-up." That gold was gone, and both driver and guard sent out with the stage was missing!

"They've come to grief, I'm thinking, and we may yet have to learn the very worst," gravely said the agent, as he emerged from the rifled stage. "You know them, gentlemen: Old Potter and Link Hamer."

"Solid lads, both of 'em!" declared one of the miners.

Instinctively all eyes flashed over the coach, all looking for the same significant evidence of a fight; but neither blood-stains nor bullet-marks were to be discovered, and Alexander spoke again:

"They must have been dropped along the trail, although how the team got back here without—who'll volunteer to go look 'em up?"

"I will, for one!" cried out a clear, manly voice from a little to the rear of the densest crowd. "Come, gentlemen! We'll find and fetch 'em back, living or dead!"

More than one cheer greeted that brisk speech, for by this time the Red Hat Sport, as Richard Cunningham was now pretty generally known, had won for himself a place as well as a name.

There was no lack of followers where such a man took the lead, and leaving the Express agent to puzzle out that end of the enigma as best he might, armed men hurried away from Red Rock Bar, some on horseback, some afoot, but one and all heavily armed. And not a man among them all but would have cast his vote in favor of finding the robbers as well as the missing men.

The Red Hat Sport was afoot, not choosing to waste time in going after his horse, lest another usurp his position as leader of that enthusiastic squad; but he surely did not delay their progress any, breasting the long slope of Single Mile Run at a pace which few of the four-footed animals could have eclipsed.

And this was the voice which was first to announce the discovery of the men they were looking for.

"Yonder they are!" he cried, as his head rose above the level of that "breathing spot" on the crest of the Run. "Looks like they had been dropped in—alive, by glory!"

For one of those bound shapes gave a frantic wriggle at sound of a human voice, then, lacking a better method of signaling, lifted his bound feet in an awkward flourish.

For the next few minutes all was confusion there. The two poor fellows were hastily set free, so far as their bonds went, but they proved unable to arise without assistance, or to stand alone after being placed alone upon their feet.

Those bonds had been applied by a pitiless hand, and they had lain for many long and weary hours, their circulation impeded so that now, when the blood began to warm and to course freely through their veins, they fairly groaned and sobbed with exquisite agony!

As a matter of course, neither man was fit for making a coherent statement, and they could only gasp forth broken sentences, which served to feed rather than satisfy curiosity.

Cunningham was first to pick up the "sawed-off" shotgun, with which the guard had been armed, and it was his declaration that both barrels had been discharged, which drew forth the first positive statement from the lips of Old Potter.

When pieced together, those broken parts of a sentence indicated that he had "salivated" at least one of the robbers; and with this for a basis, the little company quartered the ground with renewed energy.

They found where one load of buckshot had scarred a white rock by the roadside, but the closest scrutiny failed to discover any trace of human blood, either there or in its immediate vicinity.

When this was made clear to Old Potter, he gave a surly growl, trying to rise to his feet, but falling back again with a husky groan. He had better success with his tongue, however.

"I tell ye I salivated one pesky critter, anyway!" he declared, one skinny paw smiting the stony ground where he reclined, his little eyes glowing like those of an enraged snake. "Don't tell me! Didn't I hear him yelp? Didn't I ketch—don't lie to me, durn ye, now! Look—go look furder, fer I jest knows what I do know, I reckon!"

The old fellow was so positive in his statement that no one seemed ready to flatly contradict him, just then, although everything seemed to be against his dogged belief as to the "salivating."

But once again it remained for Richard Cunningham to make the discovery which had escaped all others, and his voice rung out sharply from among the rocks, some little distance above the road level.

"Red paint, true as I'm a living sinner!" the Red Hat Sport shouted.

There was an instant rush in his direction, and he was found stooping over a little space of comparatively level ground, where blood stains were distinctly visible.

"Old Potter wasn't lying, after all!" was his greeting to the others as they came up. "Here's where a vein sprung a leak, for a fact!"

"That's so, but where's the cold meat?" bluntly asked a miner.

"Don't crowd too fast, gentlemen!" warned the Red Hat Sport, with an impatient wave of his hand as he bent lower to the more surely read the scarlet sign aright. "We've plenty of daylight ahead of us, and

this may be our one fair chance to solve the enigma. Patience, please, and—see where the buckshot marked the rocks, will you?"

There could be no mistaking the facts; right here had centered the leaden contents of one barrel of Old Potter's gun, and while the gray and white rocks were liberally marked with shot, it was equally clear that one or more of those pellets had found a billet in flesh of some sort: human for choice!

There was a considerable pool of coagulated blood at the spot where Richard Cunningham had first paused, as though the person wounded had lain for a considerable period, unable or afraid to beat a retreat.

But then a red trail led away from the spot, here a drop, there a drop, with an occasional smear against the edge or protruding corner of a rock; quite sufficient trail for those keen and not wholly inexperienced eyes to follow at a foot pace.

For several hundred yards the Red Hat Sport picked out this, which veered away from rather than drew closer to the road. This was a fact suspicious in itself, and one which drew forth many comments from those who kept close at the heels of the chief trailer.

If an honest man, surely the person injured would have sought for aid by the nearest, easiest, most frequented route?

Instead, he had apparently avoided the stage-trail on purpose, as though he wished to avoid rather than to find his fellow-men!

Presently the trail was lost entirely!

Cunningham came to a spot where the wounded person had evidently paused to care for his own wounds, for here lay several bits of bloodstained cloth, seemingly fragments torn from a white shirt.

But all further search was in vain. The soil was against trailing, being too dry and stony for retaining the impress of a human foot, and there were no more drops of blood to greet eager eyes.

For fully an hour longer the search was maintained, the party spreading out in widening circles, but entirely without reward. It was as though their game had vanished into thin air!

Satisfied at length that nothing further could be gleaned in that direction, the quest was abandoned for the time being, all hands turning face once more toward the head of Single Mile Run, where the robbery had occurred, and where the two unfortunates were awaiting the return of the search-party.

By this time both driver and guard had pretty well rallied from their painful confinement, and were ready enough to talk; yet they were able to give but scanty satisfaction after all.

As a matter of course they tried to make the affair show as favorably for themselves as might be, yet were hardly conscious of the exaggeration they indulged in.

They both agreed fairly well as to the force by which they had been overcome, placing it at fully thrice the actual number engaged in the hold-up; but since Old Potter had proven his claim of "salivating" one of the gang, it was an easier matter for these statements to find credence.

Giving both Potter and Hamer a mount, the little squad hastened back to Red Rock Bar, eager to tell of their discoveries, and hoping to hear of still more important ones made by those engaged upon the riddle at the camp itself. But in this they were disappointed.

Not one citizen was missing, who could not be honestly accounted for by his friends or relatives, and the only man in town who could show fresh wounds was Herman Smokehouse; and he was past suspicion, because of being bedfast!

And so it was but a poor report which Alexander had to send in to his superiors, and there was but a dim and unsatisfactory clue ready for the detectives to work upon when, in company with an official or two, they came post-haste to Red Rock Bar.

Washington Alexander had been very busy during the interval between the discovery of the robbery and the coming of the party from the East, but he had little news to tell them.

His suspicions had naturally turned toward Herman Smokehouse, owing to his former connection with the Express Company, and his known skill with locks; but all his secret investigations went to show

that the Red Hat Sport had not left his sick-room since being carried there after his duel with Cunningham, and so he was out of the question.

The detectives were baffled from the start. No clue could be had, of any kind; and when a whole week had passed and nothing whatever had been discovered, their conclusion was thus worded by their chief:

"The rascals muffled their horses after the Indian style, and, by selecting hard ground, managed to get away without leaving any trail, so it has not been possible for any one to follow them."

CHAPTER IX.

A BAD MAN BAFFLED.

WHEN the mysterious stage robbery was placed in the hands of regular detectives for elucidation, Richard Cunningham quietly withdrew, like one who felt no further special interest in the case.

Ever since his night duel with the rival Red Hat, he had led a quiet, peaceable life, seeming to avoid rather than to invite notice, polite and affable with all whom he met, yet never betraying the characteristics of a mining camp "chief."

Shortly after locating in Red Rock Bar, the Sport made good his half-promise given up there in the mountains, seeking out the chums, Old Steve and Mark Mansfield.

From mere acquaintances they quickly became fast friends, and within a week the three men were equal partners in a promising claim which bade fair to afford them a comfortable living, if, indeed, it did not give them each a neat little fortune.

Cunningham hired an experienced hand to perform his share of the daily toil, as no more than fair in one who had no practical experience as a miner, but he put in many an hour of solid labor himself.

This purchase pretty well emptied the pockets of both Claybridge and Mountain Mark, which fact may have had something to do with their locating just outside of the town proper, fitting up an abandoned dug-out in fairly comfortable style, doing their own cooking and housekeeping, as by far the cheapest method of living.

The Red Hat Sport surrendered his room at the Great Golden Eagle Hotel at the expiration of the term for which he had paid on his arrival at the Red Rock Bar, taking up his quarters with his new partners.

Acting, probably, on the theory that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," Cunningham quite frequently dropped in at the various resorts where card-playing was made a specialty, but his efforts at "bucking the tiger" were very modest, and his losses were never permitted to exceed a few dollars.

As he laughingly declared, one who depended upon shovel and pick for lining his pockets, had precious little business monkeying with the untamed beast of the wild and woolly jungle!

While making these friendly rounds it may be that Richard dropped oftenest into the establishment presided over by Amabel la Grange, the Lady of the Black and Red; but, if so, it was hardly as a captive to those brilliant charms, although he ever had a bright smile and a few genial words for the woman gambler.

On her side, the fair Amabel showed no decided disinclination to enter into a flirtation with the handsome Red Hat, though no man could say she fairly overstepped the boundary of womanly decorum.

Cunningham was too experienced a man to mistake those veiled advances, but just at present he wore armor of triple proof, so far as the fair dealer of *Rouge et Noir* was concerned.

From the very first there had been something about the pretty Florence Cammerhan which had strongly appealed to his heart, and this sentiment was deepened and strengthened with each subsequent meeting, until now the truth could no longer be disguised, even from himself: it was a case of love at first sight!

Such being the case, and the Sport being by no means a bashful lover, it will create little surprise when we add that the stalwart, handsome stranger soon fell into the habit of making his evening headquarters at

the post-office, particularly as Florence showed no repugnance to those calls.

The girl had two chairs in the little nook in the corner which she called the post-office, and one of these Cunningham usually occupied during the evening, when the miners gathered at the store to help kill time by gossiping and discussing the various events of the day.

The store had no regular bar attached to it, for Michael Cammerhan rarely touched "the stuff" himself, and had conscientious scruples against dispensing the "liquid damnation" where his only child must necessarily be an eye-witness.

But the genial storekeeper was ever ready to turn an honest penny, and as an additional attraction for the class he preferred to cater for, he provided "soft drinks," which could be sold much cheaper than whisky or beer.

This proved to be a wise provision, for the little store was liberally patronized by the men of a saving turn of mind, as well as those who did not care to indulge in alcholic liquors.

Sc much by way of preface, and now we take up the thread of our story one week later than the stage robbery which had so thoroughly puzzled the detectives employed by the Express Company.

"Well, pardner, how's the old thing running, anyway?" asked an old, gray-bearded miner, Bill Jones by name, of the postmaster. "I've been off on a prospect ever since, and sc I'm just a bit rusty, like."

"They are booming right along, of course," was the prompt reply.

"This town has got solid substance at the bottom of it, and I don't think it's at all likely to peter out."

The miner was casting curious glances around, and now gave a little start as he noticed the young couple over in the corner, neither of whom appeared conscious of the proximity of others, just then.

"Hello! Who's that dandy chap with the red hat?"

"He's a recent arrival; a Sport, and a more than ordinarily good one, too, from all accounts."

"Well, but how about his buzzing your daughter, Michael?" asked the graybeard, with a comical twist to his weatherbeaten visage as his tones lowered a bit. "Smokehouse was kind o' sweet up that way, wasn't he?"

"He was trying to be, but I don't believe my little girl ever cared two cents for the fellow," rather curtly answered the postmaster, but with a shade of anxiety crossing his face as he looked toward his only child.

"Still, old man, you must admit it's kind o' rough for him to take the gal after having taken the Red Hat title!" cut in another of the loungers, with a subdued chuckle which certainly expressed no animosity against the victor in that night duel.

Michael Cammerhan shook his head, slowly.

"Oh, there'll be the devil of a row over it all, of course, and the affair won't end until one or the other of them turns toes-up, for good and all," admitted the postmaster, trying gallantly to mask that shade of trouble showing upon his honest face as he looked across to the cozy little nook where the young couple were in pleasant converse, just then.

"How odd it is, Florence, that you and I should take a liking for each other, and upon such a short acquaintance, too," Cunningham was murmuring, as he gazed with a deal of love in his eyes upon his fair companion.

"I don't know about that," Florence replied. "I don't think it requires weeks and months for love—"

A warm flush spread swiftly over her fair face as she broke abruptly off, feeling how far astray her impulsive tongue had led her.

Richard deftly shifted his chair so as to protect the maiden from yonder curious eyes, then gently murmured:

"Why stop so short, dearest? You surely know that I love you with all my heart and soul? Say that you do know it, darling?"

Those blue eyes slowly, shyly unvailed themselves, meeting for a few seconds the ardent gaze of the Red Hat Sport.

Florence must have found courage there, for she spoke again, with only a slight

tremor in her tones, pitched so low that no other ears could possibly catch her meaning.

"Since you wish it, Mr. Cunningham—"

"What's the matter with making it Richard, or even Dick, little one? Try it, just for once, Florence!" half maliciously interposed the Red Hat Sport, audaciously following up the advantage he had so unexpectedly won.

Another warm blush, another briefly shy pause, then his name came softly across those red-ripe lips:

"Richard, then?"
"Thanks, darling!" with a half-frown toward yonder unwelcome loungers. "I'll thank you after my own fashion when we are more alone, Flo! But you were saying?"

"That I don't think it requires so very long for love to grow," the maiden answered bravely meeting his ardent gaze, gaining strength and courage through the company he so frankly regretted. "Of course, in some cases it may, but in the majority of instances I do not think it does. I imagine the bud of true love will blossom into flower as fully and perfectly in a week as in a year."

"You're a dear little girl, Florence, and I only wish I might show you how wholly my views coincide with yours on this point," whispered Richard, the love-light bright and warm in his own eyes the while. "But even if I differed entirely with you, little lady, I'd never attempt to argue the case, for I don't think I'd stand any chance at all!"

The girl blushed with pleasure at hearing these words so sweet to her ears.

"I fear you will have trouble with that mean old Smokehouse, for he is rather inclined to be ugly, father tells me," she observed, deeming it wisest to change the subject since so many curious eyes were within fair range.

"You forget that I have had trouble with him about the red hats, already, so it can't well be much worse," lightly remarked Cunningham.

"Yes, that is true, but promise me that you will avoid any further quarrel with him, Ri— Mr. Cunningham?"

"Please call me by name again, Flo—Miss Cammerhan!"

"Well, Richard then, since I must," softly whispered the blushing maiden. "Will you ever show yourself such a tyrant, though?"

"Never to my wife, darling!" was the swift retort.

And so the lovers passed the evening away, highly enjoying each other's society, and never giving thought to the self-evident fact that some one from among the number who saw them thus pleasantly absorbed, would surely find peculiar satisfaction in making Herman Smokehouse acquainted with the unwelcome fact that this new Red Hat was "taking his girl away from him!"

At about ten o'clock the loungers commenced leaving the post-office.

The Red Hat Sport made a motion as if to go, but Florence restrained him.

"Don't be in a hurry," she said. "It is only ten o'clock."

"Well, don't you think that it is late enough for a call to last, my little lady?"

"Not in this instance," with a slight blush and quick, shy glance up at that handsome face, "We rarely close the store before midnight. Father finds his greatest profit in cigars, tobacco and pipes, and you can have no idea what a quantity we sometimes sell here after ten."

"Father is a great smoker, himself, and is very particular in regard to the quality of tobacco he uses. Of course we have to keep inferior goods, too, to suit the common run of trade."

At this moment there came into the place a medium-sized man, who was evidently under the influence of liquor.

He appeared quiet enough, however, and so no one paid any particular attention to the fellow as he made his way to the counter behind which Mr. Cammerhan stood.

"Gi' me a two-ounce package of 'Lone Jack.'"

The postmaster did so, the man handed forth a silver dollar, and Cammerhan returned seventy five cents in change.

"What the deuce do you mean by this?"

the stranger demanded, slapping the three silver pieces down on the counter again.

"Your change, sir."

"Yes, I suppose so, but it isn't right. You charge too much!"

"You must be a tenderfoot, stranger. Don't you know that when you get out in this country there isn't anything less than two-bits, or a quarter of a dollar?" exclaimed the storekeeper.

But the rough-clad stranger was not so readily pacified, and with a fierce oath he struck away the silver bits as he viciously cried out.

"Aha! Ye'r trying to rob me, that's what ye are! Trying to rob me, because I'm a stranger in yer measley old camp!"

"No, I'm not trying to rob you, either," declared Cammerhan, forcing himself to speak with moderation, although the warm glow of anger was beginning to darken his face. "I don't want your money. Here it is, and now get out of here, in a holy hurry, too! I don't allow any man to call me out of my name, or to accuse me of cheating; understand?"

"I understand that you're an infernal fraud, and if you dare step this side the counter, I'll prove it, too!"

"Will you permit me, Mr. Cammerhan?" just then asked a clear, resolute voice, and the Red Hat Sport advanced with anything save an amicable glitter in his dark blue eyes.

But the now thoroughly aroused storekeeper motioned him aside, at the same time springing nimbly over the counter, just as the insolent stranger aimed a savage blow with clinched fist at his flushed face.

In another instant there was a confused "mix," then the fellow was fairly hustled to the door and flung outside, honest Michael nearly bringing about his own downfall on the threshold by endeavoring to land an indignant kick beneath those flying coat-tails!

The drunken fellow quickly scrambled to his feet, facing the door in which the postmaster now stood, shaking a balled fist as he fairly howled forth the epithets:

"You thick-headed, no-account, white-livered, black-souled son-of-a-gun! If you dare step out here, I'll whip you so mighty sudden you'll never know what hurt you!"

The storekeeper coldly retorted:

"You had better let your legs carry your drunken carcass off, and keep your breath to cool your soup. I'm not at all anxious to mix further in a quarrel with a low down loafer like yourself, but if I have to—well, better not crowd me into it, stranger!"

The fellow suddenly stooped and gathered up a handful of gravel, hurling it with vicious force full at the postmaster, and a fair portion of the stinging little missiles caught Cammerhan fairly in the face.

This was more than purely mortal man could be expected to stand, and with a cry of rage the postmaster sprung over the threshold, making a savage rush for the rascal, and though the miner struck out fiercely, endeavoring to knock the old man down as he came to close quarters, his blows were of no avail.

They were powerless to check that bull-like rush, and clinching, the two men struggled desperately for a brief space before falling to earth, tight-locked in each others' arms, amid a roar of laughter and cheers from the witnesses from the post-office.

CHAPTER X.

A CLEW TO THE RED RIDDLE.

ALTHOUGH so many years younger than his adversary, the stranger proved to be but a poor match for the sturdy postmaster, and in a very few seconds after their fall to earth together, Cammerhan turned his antagonist, and gripping throat with one hand, he used its mate to shower heavy blows upon that purpling face, now upturned toward the stars.

It was anything but a scientific exhibition, and honest old Michael thought only of conquering his man as quickly as might be, hammering him without thought or show of mercy until a choking cry was forced through that compressed windpipe.

Words could not be distinguished, but

Cammerhan had been a noted "rough-and-tumble" fighter in his younger days, and had no difficulty in rightly interpreting those sounds.

He slackened his grip, permitting the breath to pass in and out more naturally, but his balled fist was held threateningly above that bruised and bloody visage while he demanded:

"Have you got your fill? Holler 'nough, then, or— Holler, blame ye! Holler fast an' holler loud, or down comes the viledriver!"

"Let up, cuss ye!" hoarsely growled the miner. "I give in."

"Beg my pardon, then. Do you beg, or must I—eh?"

"I beg—don't hit me again!"

That was enough, and the doughty champion scrambled to his feet, arranging his disordered garments and brushing the dirt from his clothes, for the moment paying no attention to the defeated fellow.

Luckily all were not so careless, else the old gentleman might have met with worse than defeat; for the stranger brushed one unsteady hand across his eyes, then jerked a revolver from the spring-top holster at his hip, leveling the weapon toward the unsuspecting postmaster!

The Red Hat Sport had held himself in readiness to chip in whether or no, in case the parent of his sweetheart should show signs of getting the worst of that impromptu "mix-up," but, seeing how well able the old gentleman was to take care of himself, he paused near the open door, one hand resting lightly upon the side-counter, near the scales.

As he saw the stranger make a move toward his gun, Cunningham closed fingers upon one of the heavy iron weights, and, springing clear of the building, threw the weight with vicious force at that rising hand and the weapon it gripped so venomously.

He gave a warning cry as he did this, but, though Cammerhan wheeled on the instant, he would have been too late to save himself had that noiseless shot been less accurate.

Striking both hand and gun, the iron weight knocked both aside, the first bruised and with broken bones, the other exploding as it flew far off through the night, its lead doing no harm, but its echoes spreading the alarm far more swiftly than could the unaided voice of man.

The would-be murderer staggered, and then the Red Hat Sport was upon him, gripping shoulder and thigh, heaving him clear of earth and swinging him above his crimson-hatted head, holding him thus for a few seconds in spite of his desperate efforts to break away, then hurling him with terrible force to the ground.

All this before another could interfere, and there were pistols out and gripped in ready hands as the Red Hat Sport stood over the fallen stranger, ready for him or for any friends who might feel inclined to take up the quarrel where he had been forced to drop it.

That proved to be a needless precaution, however. The man was stunned for the moment, and, when he began to rally his scattered wits, he seemed utterly helpless, as well as friendless, in that community.

He tried to rise, but in vain. A faint groan escaped his lips, and, as he looked up at that armed figure towering above him, he managed to gasp forth the words:

"Don't—I'm not fit to—Help, for love of heaven!"

"Fetch a chair, some of you fellows!" cried the Red Hat Sport, putting up his revolver as he saw how impotent his adversary now was.

When the chair was brought, Cunningham lifted the miner to a seat, but the fellow would have fallen helplessly from it, only for those sustaining hands.

The Red Hat Sport could not help seeing that this might easily prove to be a serious case, and he hurriedly asked that some one go for medical aid in a hurry; but scarcely had the request been made than a cry broke forth:

"The doctor! Here he is, now!"

Such proved to be the case, for Paddy Murphy was hurrying up, attracted by the sound of that accidental shot, scenting sport, if not a paying patient.

Cunningham was about to explain, briefly,

when he was startled by a husky muttering from those bruised lips, and still other ears caught the significant words:

"You did it, curse ye! I saw ye—Don't let him—ah-h-h!"

The Red Hat Sport gave a sharp exclamation, but not so much at those incoherent words as at the spread of fresh blood which marked the soiled shirt of the stranger, now revealed by the busy hand of the doctor.

"Who shot him?" asked Murphy, with a brief glance around.

"Who shot him?" echoed Cunningham, amazed for the moment. "No one shot—unless he shot himself!"

"You did it!" repeated the stranger, then closing his heavy lids and seeming to collapse entirely.

Dr. Murphy fell to work with professional zeal, and it was a pretty general belief that the fellow had been struck by the shot from his own gun, when the weapon was knocked out of his hand by the flying weight.

That belief was of short duration, however, since Dr. Murphy declared that there was not one, but two separate wounds, neither of which had been inflicted within the past two or three days!

A brief silence followed this announcement, and eyes sought eyes with a growing belief; a belief shortly after voiced by the graybeard, Bill Jones.

"Thar's whar yer red paint come from, pard's! He's one o' them cussed road agents, fer all my ducats!"

The witnesses crowded around with increased curiosity at this, but Dr. Murphy sternly bade them fall back, to give the sufferer more air.

By this time the crowd had greatly increased, added to by that accidental burning of powder, and among the latest arrivals was Mark Webster, the gambler.

He gave a little start and caught his breath sharply as he fell back in obedience to that command, and he watched the further proceedings with deepened interest.

Having made a cursory examination, and finding the poor fellow in sore need of better attention than could be given him out there in the starlight, Dr. Murphy made the fact known, asking what aid could be had?

After a brief pause, Webster stepped forward with an offer.

"He can have a share of my shanty, Doc., until you can do better. Of course, I don't know the fellow from Adam's great-grandmother, but—"

"That's enough, sir! All I want is a chance to—rig up some sort of litter, please! He needs help, and needs it mighty bad, too!"

Honest men rarely fail to respond promptly to such a call, no matter how little worthy of mercy or pity the sufferer may be; and in the course of a few minutes the wounded stranger was lying upon the gambler's bed, with his body half stripped, and Paddy Murphy giving him his best and most skillful attention.

There could be no chance for disputing the assertion that two bullets had struck this stranger, for there was an ugly gash running along his skull just above the left ear, and an angry, badly inflamed wound in his right breast.

Dr. Murphy felt fairly confident that the lead was still in that last wound, and his cautious searchings helped restore the stranger to his senses, far enough at least to tell his name and rank: Dirk Ingalls, the one, and prospector the other.

Further than this he refused to speak, locking his bruised lips in dogged fashion as the physician asked about his hurts, and how he had come by them.

Mark Webster had offered his services to the doctor, as well as his shanty for the injured stranger; and now, with the little interior cleared of all others, the gambler did not find it difficult to catch a fair chance for which he was waiting.

While Murphy was washing his hands in one corner, Webster softly spoke the name given above, and as the wounded wretch shrunk away from him with instinctive dread, he whispered further, vowing his friendship.

Even now the other failed to recognize the gambler, and muttered as he shrunk away:

"Are you his pal?"

"Whom do you mean, pardner?" eagerly asked Webster.

"I saw—that red hat was—"

"Cunningham? No, I'm no pal of his, for I hate him even worse than you can, Dirk!"

"He did it! I swear he was the one who did it!" gasped the wounded wretch, speaking a bit more distinctly in his fierce hatred for the man who had so easily wrought his downfall that night.

"Who did it, thin?" sharply demanded Paddy Murphy, turning at those sounds, his florid countenance all aglow with a curiosity hardly professional. "Who did it, thin, I'm asking ye, sor?"

Webster shook his head slightly, but the hint was sufficient for those quickening wits, and Dirk Ingalls lay upon his dingy pillow more like a corpse than a living, vengeful man.

The doctor did not persist, just then, for he knew he had serious work before him, and that his patient would need pretty much all of his physical strength and nerve to pass through that ordeal.

Aided by Mark Webster he made a search for the lead which he felt lay in its living sheath. That search was ten-fold more painful than it would have been if made immediately after the injury was inflicted; but Dr. Murphy made the stranger understand that further neglect would almost certainly cause blood-poisoning, and that meant simply death!

Still, the ordeal was very severe, and Dick Ingalls seemed nearly murdered by it, to make use of Paddy Murphy's own expression.

For a time he fought against the final proddings, but the doctor persisted, then gave a long breath of relief, triumph and—something else!

For the missile was ball from neither rifle nor revolver, being a buckshot!

Dick Ingalls gave a low but vicious snarl as he saw that motion and read aright that curiously mixed up glance toward the gambler.

"He did it, curse him!" gasped the wounded wretch, a spasm of pain still further distorting his battered features. "I swore I'd play even, and now—he held up the treasure-stage, I say!"

"Who held it up, sor?" eagerly asked the physician, bending over his patient as though he feared to be cheated out of the truth, even yet.

"He did—the Red Hat who—devil roast him forever!"

Mark Webster spoke up quickly, forestalling the doctor, with:

"You mean Cunningham: the man who threw you down, back yonder by the post-office? He's the one you mean, Ingalls?"

"Yes! I saw it all! I was shot, and afraid to tell until—I'll pull through this, doctor? Say I'll pull through: won't I, now?"

"While there's life there's hope," was the grave response.

"Then arrest him! As a dying man I swear he robbed the treasure-stage!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN ANTE-MORTEM ACCUSATION.

DOCTOR MURPHY was in his usual state of semi-intoxication, but he appeared to sober up at once, so strongly was he interested by this startlingly strange accusation.

His little eyes opened to their widest extent, and his thick lips parted to emit sundry ejaculations, which savored strongly of the Emerald Isle, as he stood staring at that pale but enraged visage.

"The devil an' ahl his saints! 'Tis the ilegant jontleman wid the rid hat ye're blatherin' about, thin? An' him wan o' the foinest av ahl the b'yes! An' him—augh! 'Tis the fool ye'r showin' yersel', Paddy! Payin' him full'tintion, faith, an' him crazy-would wid the delaarium av faaver an'—augh, waugh!"

The worthy son of Esculapius turned from the bed with a gesture of impatient disgust, but that action merely seemed to add fresh fuel to the wounded man's rage.

Heedless of the pain every movement caused him now, Dirk Ingalls partly raised

himself upon an arm, making a savage gesture with its mate as he harshly exclaimed:

"'Tis a lie, if you even think I'm crazy, man! He did it! Before high heaven, I take my oath that I saw him do it!"

Wary, watchful, never more keenly upon the alert than just now, Mark Webster stood fairly within reach of the wounded wretch, ready to smother or to choke off any dangerous speech, but smiling broadly as he saw how surely those extra precautions taken by Herman Smokehouse were bringing forth fruit.

Ingalls sunk back once more, exhausted for the moment by his own fierce rage, and then the gambler touched an arm with his white and soft hand, speaking quietly as he did so:

"You really mean it, stranger? You are sure you recognized one of the stage robbers in this man with the red hat: the man who jumped you so savagely in front of the post-office?"

"Yes! Don't I say that I'm ready to take my oath?"

"And you wouldn't be afraid to state as much before other witnesses, in case we should deem it advisable?"

"Before all the world, if you could fetch 'em here!" cried Ingalls, resolutely. "I'll say it to his face if he dares come and challenge my truth! Fetch him! Fetch him here, and see how I'll face him down!"

Dr. Murphy was standing with feet wide planted, dubiously rasping his stubby chin as he gazed down upon the patient.

Surely this was something more than empty raving? Surely there was more than crazy delirium in all these harsh protestations?

Webster saw that the doctor was beginning to alter his opinion as at first formed, and moving a bit closer he whispered:

"What do you reckon, Doc? Can he stand it? Oughtn't we at least give him a chance to clear up what has puzzled everybody else?"

"An' it's belaavin' the loikes av him, thin, ye are afther doin'?"

"If he stands ready to make oath to it all, why not?"

"Whoy not, is it, faith?" indignantly exploded the physician, sawing the air with his hand, which still bore ugly traces of the operation so recently performed. "The loikes av him t'rowin' dirty dirt at Misther Cooningham, thin! An' him—sure, me jewel, hasn't that same jontleman ped his way cl'ane into the harrt av me afflictions, thin? Wasn't it him that sint me Misther Smokehouse as a patient: an' ivery cahl I make as good as the goold in the fist av me? An' didn't he sind me this other patient foor—g'way with ye, man, dear!"

"That's all right, far as it goes, of course, Doc, but if he's the fellow who played road-agent that night, surely you wouldn't help keep him out of the just grip of the law?"

Doctor Murphy rasped his chin still more vigorously, then Webster added in little more than a whisper:

"Don't forget that there may be a pile of money in it, Doc!"

"Divil bless me av I wance gev'tough to that, thin!" once more exploded Murphy, his little eyes catching a different luster at that significant reminder. "'Tis the juty av a jontleman to abide by the law an' constitution, sure! An' this—the reward!"

"I'm not above taking that same reward, even if you are, Murphy," avowed the gambler, making a move as though about to leave the house.

So at least the doctor interpreted that movement, and fearful lest he be left entirely out in the cold when it came to claiming the reward offered by the Express Company for the detection and arrest of the robbers, he snatched up his hat, spluttering:

"Howld ahn—howld ahn! Ye must stay roight here, faith, whoile I roon afther the midicne which—bide a bit, man, dear! Wait ahntil I can go an' coom, foor—wait, I till ye, me jewel!"

The doctor fired himself out at the door in ludicrous haste, vanishing from sight of the gambler and the wounded man in an instant.

Mark Webster made no move to follow after, but closed the door, turning the catch to guard against premature intrusion, then turned back to the bed upon which Dirk Ingalls was lying.

The latter shrank a bit as he caught the light which glowed in those eyes, but Webster spoke swiftly, like one who dares waste no time.

"I knew you almost at first glance, Dirk Ingalls, and that is why I offered to lend my roof to cover your head; but now—I know more than that! I know that you are the man Old Potter shot at the latest hold-up of the stage!"

"What if I was? Couldn't it be—an accident?"

"Then you admit you were that man?"

A slight nod gave assent, and the gambler quickly added:

"How did it come about? By what chance were you shot? Surely you wasn't one of the—the gang that turned the trick?"

"An accident—just an accident, I'll take my dying oath," the wounded man said, earnestly. "I just happened to be in the right place to catch part of the load, and so—but I'm weak and nearly worn out, man! Don't make me—let once telling serve for all, can't you?"

"And you'll tell all?"

"Everything! Only wait until the rest comes."

Dirk Ingalls spoke faintly, uncertainly, now, his heavy lids closing as though he grew drowsy; but Mark Webster gripped an arm with pitiless fingers, forcing attention while he swiftly spoke in guarded tones:

"Listen, Dirk. I've no love for this fellow who took such shameful advantage of your physical weakness, and nothing on earth would please me better than to see him fall into the stern grip of outraged law! But—are you dead sure he's the right man?"

"I saw him—his big red hat!"

One white hand rose to smooth down that drooping mustache, and from back of that shield the gambler spoke next:

"The red hat? Then, if you should see another one just like it?"

"Eh? I don't—"

"Say you were to see me wearing a hat like that one, in color and in make, would you be ready to take oath I was one of the road-agent gang?" persisted Webster.

The wounded man shook his head, decidedly.

"Don't you think it, man! I saw more than the hat, that night, and what I saw I'm ready to swear to. I saw the fellow's face as he lit a cigar, and that face—"

"That face was?" echoed the gambler, as Ingalls broke off, abruptly, more through weakness than aught else.

"Was the face of the—the devil who—downed me, yonder?"

Those heavy lids lowered again, but Mark Webster was content to let their owner rest, just now. A fierce smile curled his mustache, and that evil light was burning more brightly in his cold, keen eyes.

Surely Satan was helping his own, once more!

For a brief space he stood watching that pain-twitching face, evidently thinking busily.

There was only one disagreeable doubt to trouble him, just then: a doubt born of his past acquaintance with this man.

Could he trust him to tell a straight story along the lines just marked out? Or, might it not be that the cunning knave was twisting the truth to suit his audience? Might it not be that he had penetrated the disguise worn by the Red Hat Sport, that night, and was only waiting for the authorities to come, in order to tell the whole truth with them to protect him?

The more he thought of this ugly possibility the worse it bothered him, and Mark Webster moved silently across the room, opening the door to peer forth into the starlit night.

To all seeming the injured stranger had passed out of the thoughts of the men of Rock Rock Bar; at all events none of the citizens were in sight, just then, and with a breath of relief the gambler closed the door at his back and again approached his injured guest.

Dirk Ingalls gave a spasmodic start at touch of that white hand, but it was an apparently friendly face that showed above him, and it certainly was a gentle voice that greeted his ears in instant later.

"There's no reason on earth why you

should be afraid of me, old felow," began Webster, "for I'm ready to love you as an own brother, if only for the grudge you bear this infernal Red Hat!"

"Curse him!"

"Amen, and amen to all that!"

"You're not a warm friend of his, then?"

"Don't you even think it, Dirk! There isn't a man living I'd rather see climb a tree by the hempen route than this same Red Hat! And if you can only fix this hold-up at his door, Dirk—"

"I'll take my death-bed oath he's the very man who turned the trick that night!" almost viciously exploded the stranger, showing more natural strength than he had since passing through the hands of the man of medicine.

Once again those keen, merciless eyes fill with the fire of a devilish triumph, and Mark Webster spoke swiftly:

"Tell the naked truth, then, pardner! Fix that crime upon him, and I'll not only shield you from his rage, but I'll lend a hand in running the knave up a tree! I swear it, pardner!"

A faint glow of curiosity entered those bloodshot eyes, and after gazing for a few seconds into that face, Dirk Ingalls asked:

"What's your reason for hating him so bitterly? How has he injured you? A body'd almost think—why do you want him to pull hemp?"

Mark Webster frowned a bit at those questions, but as his keen ears caught the sounds of hurrying footsteps drawing near the shanty, he hastily muttered:

"I'll tell you later, Dirk; there's no time, now! Mind: stick to the naked truth, and I'll be here to back you up in all things!"

There was no time for more. Those footsteps drew near the threshold, and after one warning glance and gesture, Mark Webster crossed the room to fling wide the door, letting the lamplight fall fairly upon the faces and figures just beyond.

Dr. Murphy was in the lead, drawing a full breath as he caught sight of that bruised face across the little apartment; a face from out of which now shone a pair of almost feverish eyes.

Close at his heels entered Washington Alexander, the Express Company's agent, and one of the detectives brought in to solve the mysterious stage robbery.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," declared the gambler, with a grave but friendly smile. "Yonder poor devil has been worrying dreadfully lest you fail to come in time."

"Is he so very badly hurt, then?"

"Doc can tell you that much better than I can," answered Webster, drawing to one side, leaving his new guest a clear field, yet standing where he could lend Dirk Ingalls silent support by eye or gesture.

Dr. Murphy first assured himself that his patient was fairly able to tell his story, so far as physical strength went, then drew back a bit with a flourish of his fat hand, saying:

"There you are, gentlemen! Ask him what questions ye like, and if he gives you the same answer he pelted me with—faith I'm thinking ye'll nade crutches to kape ye off the flure, begorra!"

With a meaning glance toward the local agent which sent Alexander to the head of the bed, notebook and pencil in hand, the detective drew close to the side of the patient thus placed at his disposal, speaking in bland, easy tones:

"You have a little story to tell, I believe, Mr. Ingalls; not to put you to too great fatigue, then, who robbed the Company's stage?"

"I saw him: a fellow with a big red hat!"

"That might serve, sir, if there was but one hat in this section to fit the description," quietly said the detective. "Surely you can give us a more satisfactory description than that?"

Dirk Ingalls lifted his head a bit higher, then asked Webster:

"Who was the devil who jumped me, back in front of the post-office?"

"If you mean his name, he is called Richard Cunningham."

"He's the man I mean!" with fierce decision. "Richard Cunningham robbed the stage, for I saw him turn the trick, with my own eyes!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE STORY OF AN EYE-WITNESS.

ALTHOUGH they were in a measure prepared for this declaration, thanks to the whisky-oiled tongue carried by Paddy Murphy, both the detective and Washington Alexander gave signs of startled interest, their eyes meeting after that fierce accusation.

Mark Webster lowered his lids the better to conceal that tell-tale glow of evil triumph, and one hand came up to smooth his heavy mustache for the same reason. Trained though his features ordinarily were, just now they might have betrayed their master.

But, the latest comers had eyes and thoughts only for the wounded stranger, whose words were about to solve the riddle which had so far baffled all hands, and, quickly smothering his excitement, Detective Thomas Kemper spoke again:

"Take it as easily as you can, sir, and bear in mind that we only want to learn the solid truth: if you can give us that—"

"I'm giving it to you in great chunks, then!"

"See that you keep those same chunks wholly free from alloy, then," was the almost grim warning. "This charge may put a man behind the bars for the remainder of his life, so don't let prejudice carry you away."

"You say it's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, you want most?" asked Ingalls, with a half-sneer.

"Just that, and nothing more, nothing less, sir."

"Then right here you have it, on the oath of a man who feels that this is his deathbed!" exclaimed Ingalls, at the same time lifting a hand like one wishing to record the oath. "I swear that I saw the Company's stage held up, and that the man you know as Richard Cunningham led the gang of road-agents!"

Alexander was writing rapidly on his pad, and gave a short nod in answer to the glance shot his way by the detective.

"I've got it down, word for word," he said, then stepped forth from his semi-concealment, speaking to the injured stranger: "You're ready to sign your own words, of course, sir?"

"Who and what are you, first?"

"The Company's local agent, and I'll go his bail," hastily assured Mark Webster, with a covert gesture, which had even more effect than his words upon the other.

"If it's the simple truth you've spoken, you surely can have no valid reason for not signing what I have here set down," added the local agent, holding the pad so that Ingalls could read the writing.

"I'll sign that, and more, too, if you want!" came his sturdy assurance, a moment later. "If you'll listen, gentlemen, I'd rather tell just how and why I got into this nasty mix."

"You're willing to tell it all, then?"

"Of course, else I wouldn't have spoken at all. Only—haven't some of you got a bit of whisky? I'm parched with thirst, and—"

"Ah, me b'ye! don't I know all that, thin?" sympathizingly exclaimed Paddy Murphy, rather than the man of medicine, at the same time producing a freshly replenished flask of liquor, placing the nozzle to the eager lips of his patient.

"Will ye luuk at him, thin! Av he don't suck jist as natheral as a frish-born babby, thin ye may call me a loir, begobs!"

Dirk Ingalls drew a long breath and grateful sigh as he reluctantly relinquished the flask; but the dose really seemed to do him good, and his eyes looked more natural as they passed from face to face.

Alexander held pencil and note-book in full view, satisfied now that their man would not flinch from having his words recorded.

Mark Webster gave an assuring nod as those eyes came to his face, and a bit later the detective asked the question:

"Are you ready to begin your narrative, Mr. Ingalls? If you feel strong enough, perhaps you'd better begin, at once. You say—?"

"That I saw the stage held up by road-agents, and this is the way it all happened," began the injured man, lying back upon his pillow, but otherwise showing far more

strength than even the doctor had dared hope for, under the circumstances.

"I was bound for Red Rock Bar, where I counted on making a strike, and for reasons of my own I preferred footing it along the trail to holding down a cushion in the hearse."

"What made you so late on the road?"

A dogged, almost sullen expression came over that bruised face, and its owner gruffly made reply:

"That's my business, not yours! It's enough that I had reasons for wishing to enter town without the accompaniment of a brass band! If I can't tell my story after my own fashion—"

"Tell it your own way, then," yielded the detective, but making a mental note of that particular point.

"I'll tell it my own way, or not at all, you can bet your last ducat on that, sir!" bluntly asserted the stranger; then adding: "And so, as I said before, I was coming here from Happy Hollow, taking the stage road, but trusting to my own legs for locomotive energy. And I got along all right until I came close to the head of what I now know you call Single Mile Run."

"What happened you there, please?"

"Nothing, just then. But I heard a man cough, and that made me think of road-agents! And so I took to cover, laying low long enough to learn a little more: to learn that there was a gang of some sort holding the pass just in front of the long slope ahead of me!"

"And you saw--just what?"

"For one thing, I saw that I couldn't hope to slip through that narrow neck without being spotted by the gang, and perhaps shot for trying it on! And so I took to the rocks, instead, creeping closer to the ambuscade, until I was where I could both see and hear what was going on there below me."

Mark Webster turned pale, his hand mechanically moving toward the butt of his ever-ready revolver; but no one was looking his way, and he waited, listening with bated breath.

Both the detective and the Express agent were bending forward with growing interest, and Dr. Murphy was shifting his weight from foot to foot with clumsy impatience as he likewise listened.

"You both saw and heard them, you say?" asked the detective. "Does that mean you could catch all they said to each other?"

The answer was not immediately forthcoming, and Mark Webster fairly held his breath in suspension. Was this knave about to expose him and his pals? Had he merely worn a disguise long enough to insure the ruin of the man under whose roof he had found the shelter he so sorely needed? And now that aid was beside him, would he—

Before the gambler reached the end of that mental query, Ingalls spoke in response to the detective's question:

"No; not all they said, but enough to make it clear they were lying in wait to catch the extra put on by the Express Company."

The gambler closed his eyes, fairly dizzy with relief.

"Did you recognize any of the party as men whom you had met before?" asked Detective Kemper.

"No. I only saw the face of one man, and that was when he struck a match to light his cigar. I had been partly guided by the scent of burning tobacco, and fortunately I gained a place among the rocks where I could see his face as he relit his cigar."

"And that face was—whose?"

"The face of the man you know as Richard Cunningham!"

"Be careful, sir, for much depends upon the words you utter," gravely warned the detective. "You are certain there could be no mistake?"

"If mistake there was, he made it when he struck a new light for his cigar!" declared the wounded man, with strong emphasis. "I know just what I'm saying, gentlemen. I know just what it means, and I likewise know that I am in a mighty bad way. This may easily prove to be my deathbed, and as a dying man I make this charge: Richard Cunningham was head and front of

that hold-up: I swear it, by all my hopes and fears of an hereafter!"

Mark Webster smiled viciously as he listened, all fears for himself and his comrades in crime banished, now. Surely Satan was standing their true friend and patron that night!

Alexander signified by a nod that he had down the pith of that story, far as told, and once more the detective urged the wounded witness to tell all he knew, without reserve.

"Well, there isn't so mighty much more to say, but here you have it."

"I saw that I couldn't slip past the gang—there were only three of them, but that looked like three too many!—without being caught, and I hardly dared chance making a circle through the rocks, for pretty much the same reason. Result: I lay low where I was, actually enjoying myself, since it wasn't every day a fellow could be eye-witness to the turning of a trick like that!"

"You were up among the rocks, to the left of the road, where the blood signs were discovered, later on, then?"

"Right there, worse luck! But I never dreamed of such an accident as was to come—"

"It really was an accident, then?"

"That's what it surely was! But let me tell it my own way, if you want me to tell it at all!"

"All right: go on, please."

"Well, I waited there, trying to catch enough of their talk to make out just who the gentlemen were, but with mighty poor success. I knew they intended a hold-up, but that was far as I could find out, always excepting that glimpse of a red hat and a full beard by the glow of that match!"

"I was actually thinking of slipping a bit closer and lower, when that fool notion was knocked out of my head by the sound of wheels at a distance, and from the actions of my friends below, I knew that the hearse for which their trap was planned must be on hand."

"And so it proved to be! And I watched the three rascals line up alongside the trail, two on my side, one on the other, the Red Hat acting as boss, the others carrying lariats.

"The stage came up the level, and when almost up to the ambush the nags began to slack up, like they wanted a breathing spell."

"That's customary, after climbing Single Mile Run," explained the Express agent, as Dirk Ingalls paused, taken by a sharp pain, just then.

Dr. Murphy promptly offered the flask of whisky, and a long pull at this gave the wounded witness strength to resume his narrative.

He told how the man in the red hat arranged his slender force to the best advantage, making the situation perfectly clear to his auditors before going any further with his story.

Then he told how the chief sounded his stern challenge, at the same time covering the men on the box-seat with his guns, and how that significant warning was promptly obeyed by the driver.

"But the fellow who acted as guard seemed made of sterner metal, confound him!" cried the eye-witness, with a wry grimace as though the bare allusion caused his wounds to tingle anew. "He didn't hold up for a cent! Unless it was by holding up that cursed sawed-off scatter-gun he was armed with!"

"The other fellows roped him, just as he shot at the Red Hat, and so saved the head devil, but as he took a tumble his other barrel went off, and the next thing I knew I never knew nothing!"

"Old Potter dropped you, did he?"

CHAPTER XIII.

BRANDING THE RED HAT SPORT.

DIRK INGALLS gave a wry grimace.

"It looked as though the gates of hell were opening for me! I saw a mighty glare of red light, and then it seemed as though the entire mountain was falling on top of me!"

"You were shot?"

"That's about the figure, gentlemen, but

"I never knew it then," admitted the eye-witness, lying back on his pillow and shivering a bit as he thought of close call. "I couldn't have been more dead to all that was going on around me if my soul had actually skipped the range!"

Detective Kemper frowned, and Alexander shook his head regretfully at this frank admission.

They had learned much, already, but there was still more they would like to be assured of. If this sole witness was lost to all consciousness, could he clear away the remaining mystery of that hold-up?

"How long were you insensible?" asked the detective, by way of setting their doubts fully at rest.

"Long enough to pretty well drain my veins of color, anyway," came huskily from those bruised lips. "Maybe doctor, yonder, can tell you, for I don't know how."

Murphy shook his head as those eyes instinctively turned his way.

"Devil a wan o' me's a bit the wiser, faith! He's lost a power av blood, an' that he's been making since isn't much betther, annyway!"

"How much more of the robbery did you see, please, Mr. Ingalls?" the detective asked, after a brief pause for thought.

"Nothing at all after that second shot, sir," came the frank admission. "When I came to my senses again, all was quiet around me, and I couldn't see any more than I heard."

"What was your next move? Why didn't you come here for help?"

A faint sneer showed itself amidst all those bruises, and there was an echo of the same in the tones of the witness when he spoke in reply:

"Any fool ought to be able to guess that much, sir! Why should I, pray?"

"You were badly injured, and the further exposure might easily have proved fatal."

"Hardly as fatal as a hempen plaster 'round the neck, though!" with a dry chuckle at the grim idea. "Not a bit of it, gentlemen! I'm free to own I was knocked silly in that one round, but still I had too much solid sense left me to cut my own throat.

"I knew I was pretty hard hit; that came to me as quickly as my senses; but I likewise knew that I'd got to light out of there in a holy hurry, else I might end by paying scott for the entire gang of road-agents!"

"Now you know why I didn't try to reach town, although I had my own reasons for wishing to get here in a hurry; and now you know why I wiped out that trail of blood just as quick as I could contrive it!"

"Then you did it all yourself? You had no one to help you?" asked Alexander, the more surely to settle a doubt which had been in his mind ever since the robbery was discovered.

"Who was there to lend me a helping hand?" asked the wounded man, a tinge of bitterness in his tones. "By myself, of course! And though I felt weak as a kitten and sick as a dog after bandaging up my hurts, I forced myself to crawl on through those infernal rocks, steering clear of the road, heading as directly as possible for a snug little *cache* of which I knew; just where and what that is, please excuse me from saying, gentlemen!"

"You preferred running the risk of death through neglected wounds, it seems?" thoughtfully observed Detective Kemper. "Didn't the thought of dying alone in those hills trouble you any?"

"Not nearly so much as the thoughts of what might follow discovery," grimly answered the witness. "You can guess part of what I was thinking, of course; that I'd surely be accused of playing road-agent."

"How else could I account for my wounds? And what show would I stand against a crowd such as would naturally collect to gawp at a toll-taker? The show of a cat in hades with its claws cut!"

"Surely you could call witnesses to prove your past record?"

The injured man laughed outright at this innocent observation.

"I surely could, but—would I?"

"Why not?"

"Because their evidence might tell against,

rather than in my favor," admitted Ingalls, with cynical candor. "Now you've got my full reasons, gentlemen: my past record would tell against me, rather than speak in favor of my innocence!"

Dirk Ingalls made a motion toward the whisky flask, and without a word Murphy passed it over.

That sort of medicine could hardly prove the best in the world for one suffering from neglected gunshot wounds, but the (more or less) worthy physician was learning the true value of this, his latest patient, which made all the difference in the world.

Hugging the now nearly empty flask to his bosom, the injured knave resumed his story without further urging.

"I contrived to stanch the blood, bandage my hurts, break my trail, and then crawl into a snug little *cache*, where I knew I could lie hidden from anything less keen than the nose of a trained bloodhound.

"It wasn't a very fattening diet, gentlemen," with another of his grimly humorous grins. "It was pretty much all outgo and no income; but anything seemed better to me than stretching hemp. And then—well, if I didn't grow fat over it, the bare thought of getting even with the devils who laid me out, kept life in my skin!"

"When did you first decide upon coming to Red Rock and making known your discoveries?" gravely asked the detective.

"I had that notion from the very first," came the swift reply. "It was all that kept life in me, I tell you! I put the whole blame upon that devil in the red hat—curses cover him from top to toe, now and forever!"

His voice died away in a vicious growl, his hands clinched tightly, his bruised face looking more like that of a demon than aught human, just then.

Mark Webster frowned a bit as he saw the detective and Washington Alexander exchange looks, and he made a covert attempt to warn Ingalls how surely he was injuring his own cause by so openly betraying his savage hatred for the Red Hat Sport.

If Dirk saw, he made no sign, but, rallying his powers once more, he resumed his narrative.

"Well, as you can see for yourselves, I didn't starve while lying out. I gradually picked up, and, when I felt fit for the work ahead of me, I struck out for this blessed camp once more."

"Meaning to tell of the robbery, of course?"

"Don't you think it, pardner! What was the robbery to me? What good could it do me to mix further in that scrape? And I never once thought of running across my duck of the crimson head-gear: never once dreamed of such a thing, else I might have made a better record when—devil cover him deep with hot ashes!"

"What other business could be so urgent as to—"

"Don't you bother your brain over that point, sir, for 'twas my business, not yours," gruffly interposed Ingalls. "And so—let me get through with it, can't you?"

Detective Kemper said nothing, but nodded his willingness, those keen black eyes of his intently scanning the face of the witness.

"Well, as I was about to say, I hit the camp all right enough, and, as I'd been kept on mighty short commons of late, the very first thing I did was to throw myself outside of three or four drinks: just sufficient to put me on edge, ordinarily, but now—well, the load proved to be more than I could carry, straight, in my present state."

"In other words, it made drunk come?"

"That's about the heft of it, sir," admitted Ingalls. "If I'd been my own self, I'd never have mixed up in such a foolish row; or, if I had, the ending would have been mightily different from this! Curse that Red Hat, I say!"

"You recognized him by that peculiar head-gear, of course?"

"Well, that first caught my eye, but then—I can take my oath to the face under that red hat! I repeat it, and I speak as a man who may never live to see another sunrise: the fellow you call Richard Cunningham was the man who acted as leader in the hold-up and robbery of the treasure stage! Before high Heaven I swear all this!"

Exhausted by his own fierce emphasis, Dirk Ingalls lay back on his pillow, gasping

painfully for breath, looking far more like a dying man than one who had so recently exhibited such fire and determination.

With a glance toward Alexander, Detective Kemper rose to his feet, and Mark Webster spoke hastily as he barred the way:

"You want his signature, don't you, sir? I'll get it, if you do."

"Well, I don't know as it matters, much. We're all witnesses to his words. And then he's able to repeat all charges should it become necessary to do so."

The gambler seemed not a little taken aback at this unexpected indifference, but quickly rallying, he spoke further:

"When are you going to make the arrest? I'm ready and willing to back you up if you wish any outside assistance, sir."

"Thanks," gravely said the detective, bowing as he spoke: "I'll bear your offer in mind, and not hesitate about calling on your aid in case it should be required. As for now—will you accompany me, Mr. Alexander?"

Even the gambler's monumental "cheek" was hardly proof against such a polite rebuff, and in silence he watched the two men as they left the room, passing out under the twinkling stars.

Neither of the twain seemed in haste to give utterance to their thoughts as they moved away from the building inside of which they had listened to such a strange story.

Each man was thinking pretty much the same, each was bothered by some ugly doubts: how much of that accusation was truth, how much of it born of hatred?

There was hardly room left for doubting, so far as Dirk Ingalls's hurts were concerned: the lead extracted by Dr. Murphy almost certainly identified him with the one who left those bloody signs behind; but, had he been a mere victim of accident, or was he one of the road-agent outfit, wounded while holding up the treasure stage?

If this last was the real solution, then his vicious charges made against the Red Hat Sport surely were but the outcome of his recent discomfiture at the hands of Richard Cunningham; he hoped to "play even" by branding his conqueror as a midnight thief!

Such were some of the thoughts which so fully occupied the minds of the two men as they passed along, and both of them started a bit nervously as they found the way barred by a tall figure not long after they lost sight of the gambler's shanty.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," spoke up Cunningham himself, with a little nod of apology; "but I wanted to ask—how is that fellow faring? I had to handle him a bit roughly, of course; still I hope he'll pull safely through?"

Instead of making a direct reply, Detective Kemper quietly placed a hand upon the Red Hat's arm, at the same time saying:

"Reckon I'll have to take you, Sport!"

CHAPTER XIV.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.

At the same instant Agent Alexander clapped the muzzle of a revolver to the Red Hat's ear, adding the grim warning:

"Don't try to kick, pardner, or off comes your roof!"

Cunningham certainly was taken wholly off his guard, and if ever face of man was the picture of blank amazement, his visage was that, just then.

But he was far from being a fool, and instead of making a bad matter worse by offering resistance against such deadly odds, he stood without motion, simply exclaiming:

"Well, this does remove the fluttering fragment from the shrubbery!"

"Is it solid sense, or nasty business, please?" tersely demanded the detective, slightly tightening his grip.

"Well, there's mighty little sense about it, so far as you two fellows are concerned," dryly retorted the Sport. "What's biting you, anyway? What have I done to deserve arrest? Surely not—is it because I had to dump that drunken cuss, or let a better man be murdered?"

"Not just that, although—say you'll go with us quietly, Mr. Cunningham, and we'll

hunt a place where we can explain everything without fear of drawing a curious crowd," swiftly spoke Kemper, with a glance up the street, where a couple of uproarious miners had hove into view.

"You'll give me a fair shake, of course? You I'm speaking to, Wash Alexander!"

"I pledge my word. Now will you play white?"

"Put up your gun, and I'll answer," was the cool reply. "I'll agree to nothing unless we start off level."

The Express agent lowered his weapon, stepping back a pace as he slipped the revolver into its holster. He was plainly on guard, but that proved to be an unnecessary precaution.

"That begins to look a bit more like the white article, gentlemen!" declared the Red Hat Sport, with a nod of approval. "Now, which way? Of course, this is rank nonsense, but 'twould be a pity to spoil sport, since you seem bent on making asses of yourselves!"

"Your office will serve, I reckon, Alexander," coolly said Detective Kemper, passing that slur by without notice. "This way, please, Mr. Cunningham."

With easy grace he slipped a hand through the Red Hat Sport's arm, more like a boon companion than an officer in charge of a dangerous prisoner; and though he felt himself under arrest, just as surely as though that grim muzzle was still rubbing against his ear, Richard could hardly raise further objections.

In silence the remainder of the distance was covered, the trio only halting when at the door of the Express Office.

Unlocking this, Alexander stepped aside far enough for the other men to pass him by, then followed close upon their footsteps, shutting the door and turning key in lock.

A dim light was burning back of the counter, as usual, and turning the wick higher, Alexander placed seats for all in the railed-in space, where nothing could be seen of their movements, even should curious eyes attempt to gather knowledge through the uncurtained windows.

Looking squarely into the dark blue eyes, Detective Kemper spoke in gravely measured tones.

"Are you going to play white and sensible, sir, or must we clap on the bracelets?"

"Handcuff me, is it?"

The detective nodded assent, and Cunningham added:

"Show cause, first, gentlemen. Why have you placed me under arrest?"

"For holding up and robbing the treasure-stage sent out by the Express Company," deliberately replied the detective.

The Red Hat Sport gave a start, staring from face to face in blank amazement before exclaiming:

"For holding up the stage?"

"Just that, and nothing shorter!"

Cunningham gave a short laugh of mingled amusement and contempt.

"You're foolish, man, dear!"

"What makes you think that, pray?"

"How can I help thinking so when I know—why, gentlemen, you've surely gone off your nuts! I, rob the stage? Bah! For this once, if never before in life, you've got the wrong pig by the ear!"

The Red Hat Sport broke into a low but hearty laugh, looking anything but the traditional robber of stage or of story.

"Suppose we know just how to make that pig squeal in tune, though?" asked Detective Kemper, with just the ghost of a smile.

"Meaning me, of course?"

"You chose the term, not us, remember," with a little nod by way of further apology. "We'd be even bigger asses than you think us, if we were to take such a decided step without having good and sufficient reasons for our actions."

"Then you actually believe I had anything to do with that affair?" asked Cunningham, his smile vanishing, even while his red lip still retained a portion of that scornful curve.

"Can you prove that you didn't take part in the hold-up, rather?"

Though his lips parted, Cunningham closed them without speaking. It was as though he thought better of his first impulse for after a brief silence he slowly asked:

"I believe a man is counted innocent until proven guilty. How do you expect to fasten this charge upon me, gentlemen?"

"By an eye-witness to the whole affair," gravely assured the detective, keenly noting the effect of his words through his partially closed lids.

"An eye-witness?" echoed the Red Hat Sport.

"Nothing shorter, sir; an eye-witness who stands ready to make oath that you were head and front in that hold-up."

"You talk just as though you really meant it, too!"

"I do mean it. Our witness is ready to take that very oath."

Cunningham gave a barely perceptible start, like a man who begins to catch a gleam of light through darkness. Then he asked:

"Do you mean the fellow I kept from murdering the postmaster, this evening, sir?"

But Detective Kemper evidently preferred to ask rather than answer questions, since he quietly ignored the query, to say:

"Tell me first what you meant to say when I asked you if you could prove that you didn't take part in the hold-up? An *alibi*, of course?"

A faint tinge of color came into the Sport's face at that question, for beneath it he seemed to detect a covert sneer. Still, he could not help seeing that this serious charge ought to be met with due gravity, and so he forced himself to answer, calmly:

"I can bring an *alibi*, sir, sufficiently clear for even you to comprehend; and that is one reason for my quietly bearing with your hidden insults, which—"

"I beg pardon, sir," quickly interrupted the detective. "I meant no insult, I assure you. I couldn't fairly believe you guilty, as charged, else your arrest would have been made in a far different manner; nor would you be here, hand and foot free."

"Let it go at that, then," curtly decided the Sport, with a slight nod. "As for my taking part in that hold-up—listen, please!"

"Until ten o'clock that night, I was loafing at the post-office. The next hour I spent in playing *Rouge et Noir*, as still more numerous witnesses can bear testimony."

"The treasure-stage was not sent out until just after midnight," drily observed Alexander.

"Wait, please. From the Red and Black I went directly to my bunk, in the dug-out, where my two pards can bear witness I spent the remainder of the night."

Alexander and Kemper exchanged swiftly covert glances at this. If Cunningham saw, he gave no sign. Possibly he failed to catch the full meaning of that interchange.

Both detective and agent recalled what Dirk Ingalls had said about the force engaged in that hold-up; the road-agents were only three in number!

Was this merely a coincidence, or was not the Red Hat Sport supplying evidence against himself by mentioning his partners?

"You say you left the Red and Black tent at about eleven o'clock?" asked the detective, after a brief pause, as if for thought.

"Just on the stroke of eleven, yes. I know, because a fellow asked me the time of day by my turnip, just as I left the table."

"That came in convenient, didn't it?" with a fleeting smile. "And from there you went—whither?"

"To bed."

"At the hotel, of course?"

"No, sir; not at the hotel," a little gruffly. "I quit the Eagle when I bought a share in the Ready Penny, and ever since that I have had a bunk in the dug-out with my partners in the mine."

"And they are?"

"Claybridge and Mansfield, otherwise Old Steve and Mountain Mark," was the answer, half-impatiently. "Mr. Alexander knows them both, even if you are so mighty ignorant. Ask him."

"Oh, I've heard their names mentioned, of course; but, then, there's nothing like making all sure as we go along," blandly said the man-hunter, with an affable smile for the benefit of the Red Hat Sport. "And so, I ask, these partners of yours were likewise at home?"

"Of course they were. They are workers, not drones, and hive in at a more Christian hour than I'm accustomed to. Yes,

they were at home and asleep when I reached the dug-out."

"But, you wakened them, of course?"

"Not because I wanted to, but simply to get inside. The door was barred, and I had to rouse 'em out or bunk under the stars."

"And this was shortly after eleven o'clock?"

"Yes; certainly not later than the half hour. And I was fast locked in the arms of Murphy before the stroke of twelve."

"Then for this *alibi* you depend upon your partners, Mr. Cunningham? They are your main reliance, of course?"

"Aren't they sufficient, pray?" with an angry light leaping into his dark blue eyes.

"They will bear witness that I went to my bunk before midnight, and that I never left the dug-out again until the racket at the Company's stables yanked me out in a hurry!"

"There were just three fellows—" began Alexander, impulsively, but stopping short in obedience to a swift gesture from the detective's hand, backed by a warning flash of his keen eyes.

Turning again to the Red Hat Sport, Detective Kemper gravely apologized to him for the evident injustice to which he had fallen prey.

"I don't mind telling you that this fellow—Dirk Ingalls he calls himself—positively swore that you led the attack upon the treasure-coach."

"He lied in his throat, the scoundrel!"

"It really begins to look that way, for a fact," ingenuously admitted the detective. "Such being the case, permit me to apologize for putting you to so much inconvenience, dear Mr. Cunningham!"

"All right, so far; but now—suppose you take a little walk with me, gentlemen?" and swift as thought he caught the drop upon them both!

The two men sat as though fairly petrified..

CHAPTER XV.

GIVING THE SPORT MORE ROPE.

With wonderful swiftness did Richard Cunningham bring about this change, and their first suspicions were awakened by sight of those weapons, coming at them, muzzle foremost.

Before they could fairly realize the nature of that movement they were lined, and over those leveled tubes flashed the keen eyes of a past master in the art of gunnery, too!

"Take it easy, gentlemen, I implore you!" spoke up the Red Hat as he leaned lightly back against the railing, hands and pistols steady as the finger of fate. "Play white, or there'll be nasty business, sure!"

Wash Alexander flushed hotly as he recognized the words, and it really seemed as though he was about to risk a shot rather than submit to such bitter humiliation.

Not so with the Express Detective. To all outward seeming he was cool and composed, with just the semblance of a smile playing about his thin lips.

"Go easy, dear boy," he said, to the Express agent, putting forth a hand to hold the angry fellow in check, making the movement slowly and openly, not to provoke a snap-shot from the Sport. "We've taken our innings, now let this gentleman have his."

"That sounds white, anyway," frankly admitted Cunningham, but none the less keeping well on his guard against another turn of the wheel.

"It's just as white as it sounds, you may rest assured, Mr. Cunningham. I'm only sorry you didn't wait until my apology was completed, for it would come with a better grace while not under fire."

"That is all right, too, if it only went far enough," coldly cut in he of the crimson head-gear. "But this affair cuts too mighty deep for a bare apology to salve the hurt."

"What more can you ask, or we offer, sir?"

"Simply this," declared Cunningham, speaking swiftly but gravely. "I wish a full and complete understanding about this ugly business. I'm not a man to rest easy with such a vile charge hanging over my head."

"You're making it no better mighty fast, with your guns!" angrily declared the Express agent.

"Wait, my good friend," Kemper hastened to say, his finger tightening once more upon that arm. "You don't give the gentleman time to finish his—ahem!—request."

A trifle of added color told that the Sport felt this vailed shot, but his answer was in readiness.

"It's rather more than a mere request, gentleman; a demand, rather."

"To do what, pray?"

"As I said before, to take a little walk with me. I accepted your invitation without kicking: now will you be as wise?"

"In case we should prefer kicking?"

"That might make it a bit more troublesome for me, but the result would be the same: you'd take the walk, all the same."

This with such admirable coolness that the nervy detective couldn't help laughing a bit, but Alexander showed his teeth rather viciously.

"I'll never submit to such an insult! You may shoot, but if you fail to drop me dead in my tracks, I'll down you—for the rope!"

"If you're white and honest, there can be no insult, sir," sternly retorted the Red Hat. "You have charged me with being a thief—"

"Not we, but this Dirk Ingalls," amended Detective Kemper.

"You've made yourselves his mouthpiece, which amounts to pretty much the same thing. I've declared an *alibi*, but you needn't take that on my bare word; which fetches us 'round to that little walk."

"You've got to go with me to question my pards as to my whereabouts at the time the stage was held up. I say got to go, because I'll never give you a chance to even hint that they merely spoke the words I had time to put in their mouths before you saw them."

The two men interchanged looks, but Kemper was the first to speak.

"That sounds right and proper, Alexander. We'll go, of course?"

"I'll make no bargain so long as I'm lined," doggedly muttered the local agent. "Let him put up his guns, first."

"Shall it be a truce, then, Mr. Cunningham? You can't be more anxious than we are to get at the bottom facts of this case."

"With just one word of warning first," coldly spoke he of the red hat. "If Mr. Alexander should try to pull his gun, instead, some one's bound to get hurt; and I'll take care that person doesn't stand in my pair of boots! With that understanding—up they go!"

Swiftly as they had appeared, the weapons passed out of sight, their owner standing erect and ready for whatever might come.

He rather expected an assault by the agent, but in that he was agreeably disappointed, for Alexander made no such move.

"That's a bit more like it," declared the detective, with a nod of approval. "Up go the guns, and now we take a fresh start! You say you want us to pay your friends a visit, Mr. Cunningham?"

"Just that, if you please, sir."

"Agreed, for Alexander as well as myself," came the instant reply. "Of course it's a mere form, after receiving your assurance, sir; but it may be just as well to leave no ground uncovered now we've taken the first step. Eh, Washington, lad?"

The agent gave a low, surly growl by way of answer. Evidently he was still sore over being trapped so easily.

Paying him no further attention, the Red Hat Sport moved out of the railed space toward the door, which Alexander unlocked, letting the other men emerge, then following after them, closing and securing the door as before.

Of the trio, Thomas Kemper certainly appeared to be the most wholly at ease, for he slipped a hand through the arm of the Red Hat Sport, then attached himself to Alexander on the other side after the same fashion, laughing softly as he said:

"Any person seeing us right now would take us for the Siamese Triplets, wouldn't they? And they hadn't ought to be so terri-

bly far out in their guess, either; for we've a mighty strong bond in common: the wish to get at the actual facts of this mysterious robbery!"

"I'll do my part toward puzzling it out, after this," gravely assured the Red Hat Sport. "I'm wholly innocent, as I mean to prove even to your full satisfaction; but since I've been accused of robbing the stage, I'll take hold in sober earnest and never quit until the criminals are run to earth. I say this, and that's the same as filing an oath!"

Still, the situation was anything but a pleasant one, and hence it did not take long for the brisk walkers to draw near that portion of the foot-hills given over to the rude but comfortable dug-outs.

That owned and occupied by the Ready Penny Pards was found, and at a brisk hail from the Red Hat Sport, admittance was granted the trio.

Cunningham paid no attention to the curious looks which his pards turned toward his present companions, but bluntly spoke:

"These gentlemen wish to know where I was on the night of the hold-up, mates. Can you satisfy them?"

"Right hyar, in bunk, snorin' loud 'nough fer to keep the winkers out o' my eyes on tel purty nigh time fer cock-crowin'," bluntly asserted Old Steve.

"About what time did I come in, that night?"

"How long after midnight, that is?" blandly inserted the detective.

"That's your mistake, sir," quietly asserted Mountain Mark. "It was hardly half-past eleven o'clock when I got up to admit Richard."

"You are certain on that point?"

"I am certain, yes."

"Couldn't he have left here, later on, though?" asked Alexander.

"Not without my knowledge, sir. I am a very light sleeper, and rouse up at the least unusual or untimely sound. But—you say, Cunningham; did you leave again that night?"

The Sport smiled faintly, then quietly made answer:

"My word don't pass, pardner, it appears."

"With me it surely does!" exclaimed Thomas Kemper, reaching out a hand to grasp and shake that of the Red Hat. "I've heard quite enough to satisfy all scruples, my dear sir! Not that I really believed all the fellow said, but—you understand?"

"You are satisfied, then?"

"So far as your participation in the hold-up is concerned, yes. I believe that fellow was either crazy from his hurts, or else was trying to play even for the rude jolt you gave him, over yonder."

"And you, Mr. Alexander?"

"Unites with me in making an apology for all the trouble we've given you, sir," quickly assured the detective, before the Express agent could respond for himself.

"You're white—clean white, and here's hoping for your more intimate acquaintance, sir!"

Thomas Kemper spoke like a man in deep earnest, and with so cordial a grip closing upon both of his hands, the Red Hat Sport could not well maintain his stiffness.

Still, the detective evidently felt something out of place, there, and he cut his apologies short, leaving the dug-out with a fair adroitness, where many another man would have beaten an undignified retreat.

Silence lasted until the two men were fairly clear of the premises, but then Alexander turned upon his companion with a half-snarl:

"What sort of a game are you trying to play, Kemper? Surely, you're not going to let the wool be pulled over your 'eyes so easily as this?"

The detective flashed a keen look around in all directions before answering; but then he spoke in low, meaning tones:

"Did I foolish you, too, old man?"

"What do you mean, anyway?"

"I mean to give this Red Hat Sport rope enough to hang himself, for one thing," coolly avowed the detective, once more moving toward the town proper. "I took my chances of startling or of scaring the truth out of Mr. Cunningham, and so gave him the collar."

"But now—you've turned him loose!"

"I know it; but why? I saw he wouldn't scare worth a cent, and that so long as we held him, we'd never get scent of the missing boodle. The company cares heap sight more for the gold than they do for revenge, and so—Richard caught us off-guard, and then caught the drop!"

"You let him, then?"

"For a naked fact! And why, do you ask? Well, he's foot-free, now, and thinks he's filled our peepers with sand. You saw as much?"

"That may be, but—"

"Wait, please! He's free, and thinks we've flown the track. Still, if he is really one of the looting gang, all this will make him mighty uneasy in his mind, and so—he'll play right into our hands if we simply let him take the rope I've given him to-night!"

"You mean?"

"I mean that if he is actually our man, he'll surely try to skip out with the plunder, rather than run any further risks by remaining in Red Rock. If he should make the attempt—well!"

Detective Kemper gave a short, dry chuckle by way of filling that brief hiatus.

Alexander could not well mistake his meaning, but he seemed hardly content to let it go at that, since he spoke once more:

"Then you really think he is the guilty one, Kemper?"

"Not quite sure enough to justify putting him in irons, but this is our first clue to the riddle, and we can't afford to waste it. Wait and watch! If he is guilty, he'll surely try to skip out. If he tries that on, he's my meat!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A VALUABLE BIT OF PARCHMENT.

ALL parties more intimately concerned in that little affair kept close counsel, it appeared, for there was no particular stir noticeable in Red Rock Bar the day following that brief rough-and-tumble in front of the post-office.

A few inquiries were made concerning the stranger who had so signally come to grief at the hands of Michael Cammerhan and the Red Hat Sport, but none of the outsiders felt sufficient interest in the fellow to pay him a visit where he was lying in Mark Webster's shanty.

Doctor Murphy paid his professional call, giving a touch or two to his bandages, curtly forbidding any further indulgence in whisky, declaring that he would throw up the case on the slightest transgression of that order.

Possibly a brief interview that morning with Detective Kemper had something to do with his sudden loss of interest in this really unsavory patient; certain it is that the physician flushed with anger when Mark Webster spoke of the anticipated reward.

"Ah, the crazy devil! Who'd be afer listening to the loikes av him, faith! 'Tis not Patrick Murphy, thin, begorra!"

Nevertheless, the gambler never once slackened his attendance upon the unfortunate fellow, supplying him with all he could wish, unless it was in the matter of hard drinks: there he drew the line, but assured Dirk Ingalls he did so entirely for his own good.

To those who did not know him through and through, Mark Webster would have seemed a veritable Samaritan; but, adroitly though he played his part through all that long day, Dirk Ingalls was not imposed upon.

Webster felt certain that his old-time pal held secrets which would be well worth sharing, and tried his level best to get at them through cunning; but, when the shades of another night began to settle over the earth without his having made any progress in that direction, he lost patience and cast aside all disguise.

"You might as well own up, pardner," he said, leaning close over the injured man. "If you never get on your own legs again—"

"But I will—I'm not badly hurt!"

"Then the doctor lies," bluntly declared the gambler. "He says it will be nothing short of a miracle if you ever pull through this, and so—share your secrets with me,

Dirk, and I'll pledge my word of honor to even your scores against that infernal Red Hat, as well as the fellow who plugged you with plumbago!"

"Not him—'twas no fault of his," Ingalls huskily declared. "But, I'll pull through: I've just got to pull through, I tell you, man!"

Little by little the cunning gambler won his way through harping on this string, and when he had set those weakened nerves all a quiver, he unmasked his battery once more, sharply demanding:

"Why did you try to sneak into Red Rock Bar, Dirk? If there's anything in it, wouldn't you better go shares with a true pal like me, than lose it all through waiting for the time that may never come to you?"

"I tell you I'm going to pull through this!" doggedly muttered the wounded man.

"Well, I'm trying to hope that way, in spite of what the doctor told me, this morning. Still, it will take time for getting off your back, and if there's cause for hurry—"

"Who said there was?"

"You did, Dirk, by coming here before you'd got fairly on your pins again," bluntly guessed the gambler, his eyes glowing afresh as he saw the other flinch at his shot.

"Now--to business, pard!

"Let me into your little game, for if I can't help, I can hinder, as no man living knows better than you, old pal!"

Dirk Ingalls frowned at this hardly veiled threat, but then lay for a couple of minutes without sound or motion.

Mark Webster waited, patiently. He felt certain the cards were coming his way, at last, and that he had more to gain than to lose by humoring the invalid, just now.

Opening his eyes, a bit later, Ingalls abruptly asked:

"Is there a man in Red Rock name Muckajack?"

"Yes; two of them, in fact," promptly assured the gambler.

Dirk gave an impatient gesture as he sharply spoke:

"Not those fools; I mean Abraham Muckajack. Is he here now?"

"He was here, but now—well, he's dead and buried!"

Mark Webster spoke with provoking deliberation, but he wished time in which to study that face, and through its changes to learn, if possible, what might be denied him otherwise.

But, Dirk Ingalls gave no such signs as he anticipated, lying quietly on his pillow, with eyes closed and lips motionless.

For another round minute this lasted, which was longer than the gambler's patience could endure. With thinly veiled covetousness he put his next question:

"Is there anything in that wild rumor about a wonderfully rich mine, somewhere up in the northern gulches, Dirk? Abraham's cousins were trying to make out they hold a claim of some sort, through their relationship to the old fellow."

"What sort of claim?"

"As next of kin, I believe. But, out with it, old man! What interest have you in the dead and gone Muckajack?"

"Have I said I take any such interest?"

"What made you ask about him, then?"

"Because I knew him when—well, never mind just when, or just where, for now," with a doggedness all his own, but partly lifting himself on his sound arm, the better to face his host. "Will you play me white, Webster?"

"White for white, Ingalls."

"Good enough, and I'll go you, pardner! But, first, tell me a little more about how matters stand here in Red Rock."

"What is it you wish to know, Dirk?"

"Who was with Abe Muckajack when he hopped the twig?"

"No one. He was found dead in his dugout, just outside of town."

"How did he die? Not—murdered?"

Webster took note of a little quiver in those tones, but let it pass with a mental note for the future.

"Well, hardly that! There were no signs of violence on his person, and though he had not complained of being unwell, still it was common talk that Old Abe was failing fast, of late days."

"Who looked into the matter? Was there

anything like an inquest held over his body?"

"Who is there in this region to hold one?" asked Webster, with a half-sneer. "Doc Murphy looked him over, giving it as his opinion that Muckajack died of heart failure; the same old cloak for incompetency or don't-care-a-darn-itiveness, you understand!"

Another pause, during which the wounded man appeared to be weighing the information already gleaned; but then he asked:

"Who took charge of Muckajack's private papers: do you know?"

"They were sealed up and placed in the safe at the Express Office, as is the custom in like cases out here in the wilderness."

"Are the papers still there?"

"Not now," answered Webster, laughing a little as that query recalled the incidents immediately following the appearance of Jabez Muckajack upon the scene.

He gave a terse account of all that, his curiosity by no means growing weaker as he saw how Dirk Ingalls frowned at the information.

"Then his cousins have all that the old fool left behind him?"

"Yes, but they surely did not find all they expected, or they wished might come in their way," confidently asserted the gambler, with a shrewd guess at the full meaning of that ugly scowl. "For one thing, they never found anything connected with that fabled mine up in the Northwest."

"You are dead sure of that?"

"Sure as sure! If they had, would they be hanging 'round here, on expense, all this time? Wouldn't they have pulled out in a hurry to inspect that wonderful mine?"

A low, dry chuckle broke from those cut and swollen lips at these keen queries, then the wounded man spoke in his turn:

"Maybe they're waiting on hopes of finding what they have missed, so far! Maybe they think that finding will fully justify all their expenditures, too!"

"What do you mean, pardner? Come, Dirk!" openly betraying his growing impatience. "You've said too mighty much not to say more; so, out with your secret, old fellow!"

Ingalls cast a wary, suspicious glance around the room, then one hand rose to his breast as he huskily muttered:

"Go see that nobody's listening, pard! Make sure—look outside, I tell you, man!"

With his curiosity worked up to burning pitch the gambler complied with the demand, making sure there were no eavesdroppers skulking nigh.

He returned to the bedside with this assurance, then once more made his demand for further light on the subject.

Dirk Ingalls still hesitated for a few moments, but as he caught a threatening glint from those dark eyes, he yielded, pulling an oil-skin bag from where it hung about his neck by a stout cord.

This he opened with clumsy fingers, at the same time whispering, the more surely to confine all knowledge to their own ears:

"Swear that you'll never blow to any other soul, Webster! For this is the key to a mighty fortune—to wealth such as men sometimes dream of, but seldom live to see or to finger—save in dreams! Swear to keep the secret I'm sharing with you—on your sacred oath, man!"

"I swear—I swear by all that's good and holy!"

"By all that's bad and sinful, rather!" sneered Ingalls, unable to refrain from winging that shaft; but the gambler let it pass unnoticed, for his eyes were fixed upon the bit of stiff parchment which Dirk just then extracted from the oil-skin bag.

With a swift movement Webster gained full possession of this, and greedily scanned both its sides; only to give a little snarl of disappointment over the result.

The piece of parchment was not large, being a triangle, each side of which was not more than three inches long.

One side was black, but the other bore a few irregular scratches in ink, apparently of rivers or creeks, with here and there something which might stand for a hill, or even a mountain.

This was all he saw, save that in one corner was written the figure 3; merely that, and nothing more!

"Look at it well, old fellow!" urged Dirk

Ingalls, showing his teeth in a silent grin as Webster betrayed his disappointment.

"You seemed to doubt if there was such a mine as the Muckajack claim, but now—this goes to prove it!"

"This!" exclaimed the gambler, incredulously.

"You bet it does, Mark! There is such a bonanza, and this bit of parchment goes to prove it! A bonanza that has never had an equal since the first pick struck metal in Montana—and I just know it!"

While speaking, Dirk Ingalls took back the parchment, but now, with a low cry of fierce covetousness, the gambler tried to reclaim it, only to shrink back with a gasp of terror as something cold touched his forehead.

Dirk Ingalls held him covered with a cocked revolver.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MYSTERIOUS MUCKAJACK MINE.

MARK WEBSTER showed the streak of currish breed, just then, cowering before the pistol, fearing alike to start back or to hold his ground, for if ever human eyes looked "shoot," those glowing from that mass of ugly bruises did just now.

"Don't—don't shoot!" the gambler gasped.

"Don't make me shoot, then," grimly retorted the wounded man, lowering his weapon a bit, but still holding it convenient for use in case of need. "Look all you like, but keep your fingers off, old fellow."

"I only wanted—"

"And I only want to keep up my end. I'm clean out of kilter, Mark, so far as rough and tumble goes, but long as I can grip a gun I ask odds of no man living."

"I never intended to rob you, Dirk."

"Nor do I intend you shall," retorted the wounded man, plainly enjoying the new phase far more than did his past partner. "I haven't wholly forgotten the days of old, Webster, nor how much glue you carry at your fingertips!"

The gambler showed his teeth a bit at this slur, but let it pass by without open resentment. His covetous eyes were paying more attention to that triangular bit of parchment which Dirk Ingalls was fingering, just then.

Was it all true? Was that a guide to the mysterious Muckajack Mine which had given cause for so much idle jesting of late? Was it true, after all, that the worthy Jabez had a solid foundation for the air-castles he had been building since learning of the death of Abraham?

Seemingly satisfied with the little lesson in manners which he had read the gambler, Dirk Ingalls let his pistol rest upon the cover, just out of reach of Webster's hand, then spoke in a more amiable tone:

"Look your fill, as I said before, pardner, but keep your hands off until I grant permission, please."

He held up the bit of parchment once more. The gambler gazed at it with deeper interest than he had at first; but keen though his eyes were, they failed to make any fresh discovery.

As stated, it was a triangle, such as might result from cutting a square directly across from corner to corner, or else one-fourth of a square, the point coming from the center.

Briefly studying those ink-marks, Webster decided that the latter was the more likely, but before he could fully determine, Ingalls drew his hand back, gazing for an instant upon the chart, then giving it a loud smack!

"It's well worth it, too!" he declared, as he caught that surprised expression. "Just think, old man! A key to nature's treasure-chest! The clue to a bonanza rich enough to break the backbone of a thousand mules! A guide to fabulous wealth, and—all mine! all mine!"

There was no acting here. Past all doubt Dirk Ingalls believed all he said, and a hot, covetous thrill flashed through the gambler from sole to crown as he looked and listened.

His fingers worked agitatedly, his eyes glittered with an unholy light; but the wounded man paid no attention to those ominous signs, just then, for his whole soul seemed wrapped up in that bit of parchment.

"It's worth fighting for—we're worth kill-

ing for!" huskily muttered Ingalls, once more on guard, and when he looked that way shortly after, there was naught in that pale face to cause him uneasiness.

"How did you get hold of it, pardner?" Webster asked, his notes a bit strained, yet not enough so to startle the injured man.

"Never you mind, so long as I have got hold of it, lad."

"And it is the pure quill? It is—what is it, confound you?"

Dirk chuckled a little at that irritable explosion, but making no answer until after the parchment was replaced in the oil-skin bag and restored to its former place of hiding, under his clothes.

"What is it, do you ask?"

"Why wouldn't I ask, then?"

"Well, I wanted you should, else I'd never have let you this far into my secret," half jeeringly retorted Ingalls. "And now—listen!"

"That is a portion of the chart by means of which one can find the big bonanza those Muckajack asses are on the scent of!"

"Only a portion, then?"

"Worse luck me, better luck you!" swiftly said the present holder of that clue. "If it had been the whole affair, you'd never be any the wiser for my luck, unless you took part in picking up the crumbs I'd be tossing the hungry rabble!"

It was the insolence of uncounted wealth, but Webster actually liked it. Somehow it made that fabled bonanza seem more nearly real!

"Go on; tell me more—tell me all!" he said, hoarsely, leaning closer to the wounded miner, yet taking care not to invite another display of that shooting-iron.

"I can count on your help, then?"

"From start to finish."

"That sounds white, so lend me your ears, old pal! I've got enough to tickle them until you can't rest. If only—but wait a bit!"

"As I told you before, this bit of parchment is part of a guide to a secret bonanza. That chart was cut into at least two pieces; I believe it was cut into four, with the points meeting in the exact middle when the chart was fitted together."

"It looks that way, for a fact."

"And I believe 'twill prove to be just as I'm telling you, too," declared the owner of that precious document. "Never mind just how I got hold of this quarter; enough that I did freeze fast to it, and that I've proven past all room for doubt it is a genuine bit of a genuine chart."

"And Old Abe?"

"I know that Abe Muckajack had a portion, if not all the rest of the chart. If that portion can be found, and matched to this bit—and I've strong faith that I'm hot on the scent of it—then I've got hold of a bonanza 'twould take millions to even touch!"

Mark Webster no longer tried to mask his interest, eyes aglow, breath coming swift and hot, fingers working covetously as he crouched there by the bedside.

"Millions! Honest, pardner? And you think—where's the rest of the chart, man, dear? How can we—you'll let me in on the ground floor, won't you, Dirk, old pal?"

"Are you willing to work your way in, first?"

"Point out the way, and let my actions answer for themselves."

"That sounds white enough."

"It's pure white, and clean honest, old fellow. Only show me how, and I'll do the rest! But, you're keeping me too much in the dark, Dirk! If I'm to help, understand, surely, I ought to be perfectly posted?"

The gambler spoke coaxingly, almost fawningly, but Dirk Ingalls was too shrewd for easy fooling, and his low, mocking chuckle told how surely he saw through that sudden interest.

"Makes a wonderful difference, doesn't it? So long as I hold this bit of paper, I'm 'way up in your mind, eh, Webster?"

"Did I know anything about the chart when I offered you my shanty, pardner?" reproachfully answered the gambler. "Of course I'm interested in this affair, since you've said so much; but, after all, what does it amount to, without the rest of the chart?"

"Enough to keep all other claimants out of the pudding, anyway," Ingalls retorted a bit sourly. "All we've got to do is to find

the rest of it, when we'll have full swing; don't you see?"

"Yes, but how are we going to do that same finding? Where is the rest of it? Surely not in the papers left by Abe Muckajack, else the truth would have leaked out long before this!"

Dirk Ingalls lay back upon his pillow, listening with a faint smile to these objections; and it was not until nearly another minute had crept slowly by that his lips parted to pronounce the words:

"I say, Webster, what's all this about a woman sharp dealing a game of Black and Red here in camp?"

The gambler was wholly taken aback by this abrupt change of subject, uttering a little exclamation as he sat staring into that bruised face.

"I don't—what's that got to do with us?"

"That's all right, pardner. I'm asking, and you want to do the answering, straight as a string, too!"

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Is it true that you've got a woman in Red Rock Bar, dealing a game for the sports?"

"What has she got to do with it, Dirk?"

"Never you mind that, now. Maybe I'll tell you, later on. For now, who is she? What does she look like? In a word, tell me all you know about the woman," impatiently summed up the injured knave.

Although still in the dark as to what connection the lady of the Black and Red might have with that severed chart, Webster saw that Dirk Ingalls was in stern earnest. He was particularly desirous of keeping in his good graces, just then, so wasted no further time in giving the desired information.

Ingalls listened to that description with poorly masked interest, his fingers working, his teeth grating more than once while Webster was drawing the portrait of Amabel La Grange.

His red-veined eyes caught an ugly glow as the gambler concluded, and viciously sounded the epithet which crossed his bruised lips.

"Devil!"

"You know her, then?" quickly asked Webster, his curiosity by no means lessened. "What has Amabel got to do with it, Dirk?"

Dirk Ingalls gave a little start like one suddenly recalled to himself, and Webster felt that he had lost another fair opening through his inability to mask his own emotions.

Flushing hotly, he drew back a bit, but Ingalls hardly noticed him, and when he spoke again, it sounded more like self-communion than speech intended for another.

"If I only knew! If I could be sure!"

"Sure of what, pardner?" asked the gambler, with forced calmness. "Maybe I can help you out. If so—command me, man, dear!"

"I wish I could be dead sure of it," repeated the wounded man, "but if this Amabel of yours is really the woman I fancy, then that would account for it all!"

Webster looked as though he was burning up with curiosity, but after what had passed, he feared to press his questions too hotly, lest he work his own cause more evil than good.

After a brief silence Ingalls looked up at his face, speaking:

"Go over it all again, pardner, please! I want to see this woman a weenty bit more distinctly before—Go on, can't you?"

With a seeming patience which he was far from feeling, Webster obeyed, giving the best description of Amabel La Grange that lay in his power.

As he concluded, Dick Ingalls drew a long breath, exclaiming:

"I know her, now! I'm almost certain that's the clue I lacked!"

"What clue, pardner?"

"That explains why there was no chart or other clue to the big bonanza found among the papers left by Abraham Muckajack! Aha, ye cunning devil! I've run ye to earth at last—at last!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"PRAY FOR US, PARDNER!"

STIFLING his impatience as best he could, Mark Webster waited and watched through

that fit of vicious exultation; but, when Dirk Ingalls sunk back upon his pillow, that flushed face paling, his brows covered with drops of sweat, he ventured to ask:

"What's eating you, pardner? You surely can't mean that Amabel is a devil—your devil?"

"That's what she is, though! And—right there you have it, Mark!"

"Have what?"

"The reason why Jabez Muckajack was so bitterly disappointed when he broke the seal to the papers left by his cousin, Abraham!"

"I don't catch on, pardner."

"Does it take a gimlet to let light through that thick skull of yours, Webster? Then—Muckajack failed to find any clue to the great mine in the northern gulches, simply because that she-devil holds the pieces to match my bit of parchment!"

"Amabel?"

"If that's the name she goes by here, yes! And, now you begin to see what brought me to Red Rock Bar, don't you? Now you can give a guess at my reasons for slipping into camp without advertising my intention? Simply because I didn't want that demoness to know I was in this region, until I'd gained my point and was ready to meet her face to face!"

Mark Webster was puzzled, and his face told as much. Ingalls gave a surly snarl, as though chafed by such dense stupidity, then added:

"Will you never see light, pardner? Now—listen, can't you?"

"I am listening, but—"

"Curse your 'but,' and let me finish. About this woman Sport of yours: I knew that Abe Muckajack was dead gone on her, and I likewise knew that she'd never give him a second look, unless he—"

"Wait a bit, Dirk," interrupted the gambler, lifting a hand. "I reckon you're barking up the wrong tree, this time, old fellow."

"How so?"

"Well, if I do say it myself, there's mighty little going on in this camp that escapes my notice. And so—you're 'way off your base, old fellow, when you try to mix up those two persons."

"I know what I know," doggedly persisted Dirk Ingalls.

"That's all right, pardner, but you'll know still more when I'm through telling you. I never saw him step foot inside her tent. I never saw them together on the outside of it, either, or even interchange looks such as an old fool in love can't help spilling all over the country inhabited by the woman he's stuck on!"

Glibly ran the gambler's tongue, and, having concluded, he leaned back in his chair, nodding further confirmation of his words while looking steadily into that battered visage against the pillow.

Dirk Ingalls made no effort to check that flow of words; but, now that a chance was offered him, he partly raised up in bed, making a savage gesture as he exploded:

"Didn't I call her devil? Didn't I say—Why, man, alive! she'd fool saint or sinner, and not half try! She'd take you and make you swear jet black was snow white! She'd make you believe her all sugar and honey, until she'd carried her point, then—bah!"

As though feeling his impotence so far as doing full justice to that subject was concerned, Dirk Ingalls broke off with a bitter ejaculation, lying back on his pillow, exhausted for the moment.

Mark Webster certainly failed to recognize the fair Amabel La Grange in this portrait, but he thought it wiser not to press his own opinion in opposition, just then, sitting in silence until his guest once more gathered strength.

"You don't fully believe me now, Webster, but you will in the end. There never was such another cunning cat, for this world is all too small to shelter a brace of 'em! Still, I know how to make her sing mighty small, and all I want now is a fair chance at her!"

"Shall I fetch Amabel here, then?" quickly asked the gambler, making a motion to arise, but ceasing in obedience to the quick gesture from that bandaged right hand.

"Fetch her?" hoarsely spoke the wounded knave. "Bring her here to see me like this?"

Why, man, she'd jump me quicker'n scat! She'd let out the little spark of life I've left me!"

His voice grew weaker and less certain in its enunciation. His pallor increased. His lids drooped heavily, and everything went to show how seriously he had overtired his powers.

Mark Webster wanted to learn more, but Dirk Ingalls shook his head slightly, muttering in husky tones:

"Not now—not now, pard! I can't—come back, later on. I'll tell you more, then. But for now—I'm not—I'm sleepy as—as—Not now, I tell you, man!"

He lifted a hand as though to push the gambler back, but his strength seemed insufficient to fully carry out his will, and the member fell back, to grip the clothes over the spot where that little bag of oil-skin nestled next his bandaged bosom.

For some little time the gambler sat there in silence, bending forward, knees supporting elbows, chin resting upon joined palms, gazing steadily into that bruised and battered face before him.

As Dirk Ingalls dropped off into sleep, or a stupor which closely resembled slumber, that evil glow deepened in those dark eyes, and for once in a way Mark Webster permitted his real character to exhibit itself without mask or disguise.

Could the wounded man have seen those evil eyes just then, he would hardly have slept beneath that roof!

After a little Mark Webster noiselessly rose to his feet, flashing a swift look around that dimly-lighted room: the look of a thief, or of an assassin!

He moved a little closer to the bedside, one hand going out toward that hidden treasure; but not to touch it!

Just then Dirk Ingalls gave a faint sigh, stirring a bit; not much, yet sufficient to send the gambler's hand back with far greater rapidity than it had advanced.

Webster stood motionless for a brief space longer, but as his guest gave no further signs of uneasiness, he moved away from the bed, turning toward the door, from whence he gave a parting look at the wounded man.

It was an ugly scowl that contracted his brows, just then, but an instant later the gambler passed over the threshold, gently closing the door behind him, then striding swiftly away through the night.

He made his way as directly as possible to the quarter where Micky O'Hanna had located, and pausing barely long enough for an unsuspected glance into the rudely-furnished saloon, he passed on to the rear, climbing the stairs down which he and Black Jack had borne the wounded Red Hat on the night of the stage robbery.

At his peculiar tapping came a prompt invitation to enter, and then Mark Webster stood in the presence of Herman Smokehouse.

The Red Hat Sport was fully garbed, for he was able to go abroad once more, although still hardly recovered from the injuries he had received while fighting his rival, Richard Cunningham.

Dr. Murphy took great credit to himself for this speedy recovery, avowing it a perfect miracle of skill on his part; for he still maintained that any less skillful physician would surely have lost the patient, so terrible was that lung wound.

Smokehouse never contradicted Murphy, in public, although he felt assured the drunken doctor had erred in his diagnosis; but in private he made Paddy take far less than his demanded fee, under penalty of full exposure.

"Well, what's the matter with you, Mark?" was his blunt greeting as he saw how excited the gambler surely was.

"Sh-h!" sibilated Webster, with forefinger touching his lips. "Is there any chance of any one else hearing us talk?"

"Not unless you crack that sweet voice of yours, pardner. Why?"

"All right, then, and here's for you, old man!" exclaimed the gambler as he took a seat not far from where his host was half-reclining. "Now open your ears, and if I don't set 'em to tingling like fun, you can eat my old hat!"

"How many times have you bussed the

bottle, pardner?" drily asked the Red Hat Sport.

"That cuts no figure, Smoke, so long as I'm sober enough to reel off the truth by the yard; and such truth as you never—Listen, then!"

With no little dramatic ability the gambler told his friend and ally all that had come his way since the sun went down that evening. He told how he recognized the injured stranger as a man with whom he had held close relations in years gone by, and of all that followed the introduction of Dirk Ingalls to his shanty.

"Now, Smokehouse, what do you think of it all?" he asked, in conclusion. "Remember that I saw the piece of the chart, and that it seemed to be the pure quill!"

The Red Hat Sport had listened with gradually growing interest, and now there was a lurid light in his dark eyes as he slowly said:

"I believe that gawky Jabez Muckajack has at least a portion of the chart, and—pity we couldn't do the matching, isn't it, Mark?"

"You mean?"

"I mean just you and I, of course. We know where one portion of the chart lies, and can guess at where another bit, if not all the rest, can be found. So, as I said, pity you and I couldn't do the matching!"

There was more in his looks and his tones than in his words, but Mark Webster seemed particularly obtuse that night. Or, was it possible that he preferred others to do the first plain talking?

Be that as it may, he slowly shook his head, then said:

"If we only could, yes! Big word for a little one, isn't it, Smoke?"

"Not too big to be stepped over, if a fellow had the necessary grit to pick up a fortune when it offers, though," slowly observed the Red Hat Sport, tugging at his drooping mustaches, while steadily eying his comrade in crime.

A smile gradually came into that pale face, and then Mark Webster rose to his feet, clearing his throat a trifle before speaking.

"Well, pray for us, pardner!"

Smokehouse gave a little start at this unexpected request, for certainly praying was little in his way, and never more so than right now.

"What do you mean, Jack?" he demanded, likewise abandoning his chair. "Pray for whom?"

"Well, call it for Black Jack and your humble servant," came the light response, followed by a low, brief chuckle. "I reckon we need praying for about as badly as any brace in the camp; don't you?"

"You're up to some trick, Webster; what is it?" almost harshly demanded the Sport, frowning darkly.

"And, while about it, why not add a prayer or two for the Muckajack-asses?" smilingly added the gambler, as he moved toward the door.

"Oh! is that the size of it?" ejaculated Smokehouse, his face lighting up, as comprehension came. "Then you're going to act on my hint?"

"I'm going to improve it, rather," was the prompt reply, in low and guarded tones. "As I said, I know where one quarter of that chart lies, and it's good as in my grip, right now! With that as a starter, think I'd be such a fool as not to make a try for the rest of it? And so I say: pray for us, pardner; and pray mighty hard, too!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FOOTPADS AND BURGLARS.

THE cousins Muckajack, Jabez and Jonathan, could hardly be said to find their pathway strewn with roses, in those days.

For one thing, their hands were kept fairly full in keeping track of their convivial guide, that Bohemian detective, Lycurgus Dentatious.

Ever since that brisk little skirmish with the surprised cow-puncher, Lycurgus turned even more frisky, and seemingly had entered upon a contract to "punish" all the "forty-rod" to be found within the limits of Red Rock Bar.

Not that the detective was ever found "dead drunk." He drew the line consider-

ably short of that state. But he certainly did put in a full day's work "practicing at the bar," and seemed perfectly willing to pay largely for the privilege, too!

In vain did the cousins Muckajack hint and protest; useless was it to even "kick" when their stock of patience ran still lower; there was but one answer forthcoming from those liquor-wet lips: business!

And just as often as he was fairly cornered by the cousins, Lycurgus-of-the-golden-tongue would fall to work and prove the very correctness of his demeanor, too!

He took particular pains to show them how completely they were at a standstill until they could win a more accurate clue to that wondrous claim up in the northern gulch; and just so often did he make them believe he was fairly on the point of getting hold of that identical clue.

So it had been, day after day, night after night, ever since the odd *début* of the oily-tongued detective to the cousins Muckajack. Success-always was to be, yet never came!

By frequently discussing the matter while in the privacy of their joint apartment in the second story of the Great Golden Eagle Hotel, the cousins had come to believe religiously in the immense fortune which surely would be theirs when—ah, that little word!—the mysterious mine should lie revealed to their hungry eyes.

Holding firm in this belief, then, and still placing implicit faith in the promises made so often by Lycurgus Dentatious, they paid all expenses without demur, feeling that each dollar paid out would surely return, fetching at least a thousand more in its train.

In order to equalize the strain as much as possible, the cousins took turns in looking after the erratic Dentatious, fearing to "turn him loose" altogether, lest something disastrous happen to him, and, through him, to their budding hopes.

On this particular evening, then, Jabez Muckajack had given place to Jonathan, and was wearily plodding homeward, head drooping in sympathy with his spirits; for that evening had been a particularly trying one for the elderly guardian, and just now Jabez was wondering whether it would not be wiser to cut wholly adrift from that unstable pilot, trusting to luck and their own shrewd wits.

He was not entirely unobserved as he turned toward the Eagle, and two figures stole noiselessly toward him, their faces muffled by turned-up collars, their steps as silent as though they wore the felt shoes of professional burglars.

That portion of the street was nearly deserted, and acting in perfect concert the two shadowy shapes sprung upon their human game, the taller one flinging an arm around Muckajack's throat from the rear, giving a sharp crook to his elbow, and at the same time lifting a knee to bore viciously into the small of his back as the old gentleman was jerked quickly backward.

At the same instant this scientific "garrote" was applied, the second footpad sprung to the front of their victim, flinging a folded cloth over his face, one strong palm covering those adroitly muffled lips, most effectively checking all outcry.

A strong arm coiled around Jabez Muckajack, preventing him from drawing a weapon or making any stroke at his assailants.

Tighter grew that garrote, closer pressed the woolen gag, neither showing a spark of pity until those stiffened muscles relaxed and the victim would have fallen to the ground only for the support lent him by his assailants.

"He's got his dose," muttered the footpad who applied that garrote, at the same time slackening his grasp. "Look out for his legs, Jack; the starch has gone clean out of them!"

"All right, boss. Hyar she goes—jest like a mice!"

Shifting their grips to suit, the two footpads balanced the now limp and nerveless man between them, hurrying away through the night in quest of a less exposed situation, there to reap the reward due their audacious ingenuity.

Knowing the town as well as they certainly did, it was by no means a difficult matter for them to reach a spot suitable for their purpose, where the still insensible man was

unceremoniously dumped to the ground on the broad of his back.

"Keep an eye to windward, pardner," hoarsely croaked the taller of the footpads, as he dropped to his knees by the side of the senseless lawyer. "No sense in taking any wild chances. Let me know if—"

"You bet I will, pardner!" huskily cut in the heavier if shorter footpad. "You're playin' it on the dead level, of course?"

"And don't you forget it!"

Those long, supple fingers were even then deftly exploring the pockets of their victim, finding a tolerably fat wallet as well as a quantity of loose change; but instead of expressing delight at this haul, crisp and muffled curses came through those clinched teeth.

Every pocket was explored by those admirably-trained fingers, and as the particular object sought for was not discovered, the footpad ran his fingers over both garments and wearer, as though hoping to discover a secret receptacle of some description.

"What luck, pardner?" croaked the shorter footpad, after a brief waiting. "Pears like we'd ought to hev him curried an' rubbed all down afore this!"

Just then Jabez Muckajack gave a gasping sigh, making a faint stir like one rousing from deep slumber.

"He hasn't got it on him, that's flat!" disgustedly croaked the taller footpad. "Lend a hand, Jack! Best leave him think it's just a case of slugging, for rocks!"

Past all doubting, Jabez Muckajack was beginning to recover his consciousness, and with a swift dexterity that seemed to indicate previous practice along those perilous lines, the brace of footpads bound and gagged their present victim, pulling his soft felt hat far down over his eyes as an effective if rather novel blinder.

Muckajack struggled faintly, but he was like a child in those hands, and without power to call aloud for help, he was utterly helpless.

Without speaking a word, now, the footpads "went through" his clothes as though plunder formed their sole object, then lifted the bound man from where he lay to a stunted tree growing near, one holding him on his feet while the other bound him snugly to the trunk.

This done, the footpads moved away under the stars, as though their whole end was gained; but only to fall to cursing when safely beyond those ears.

"Waal, 'tain't so mighty durn bad as it mought be, anyhow!" Black Jack asseverated, making those coins jingle musically. "This'll pay for more'n one he-ole drunk, boss!"

"But it's not a primer to what we're after," disgustedly muttered his present companion, with a savage gesture. "I felt sure the old hound would have the chart upon his person, but—"

"Mebbe t'other'n's got it."

"Or it may be stowed away among their plunder at the Eagle," a bit more hopefully suggested Mark Webster, whom the reader no doubt has recognized in the taller footpad.

Black Jack Tudor gave a snort of disgust at that suggestion.

"Mought be up in the blasted moon, yender, fer all the good it'll do us! How'll we git in yender—hey?"

"What's the matter with walking right into the shebang?"

Black Jack gave a short grunt and sniff combined, then retorted.

"Oh, yes! But, 'tain't the gittin' in so mighty much as it is the comin' out that's worryin' me, jest now! The major keeps a turrell handy shotgun—so he does, now!"

"That goes in with the day's work, pardner," coolly observed the gambler crook, moving along toward the hotel. "You can't expect to pick up a fortune without stooping your back, and so—no work, no pay! Will you come, or shall I turn the trick by my lonesome?"

Without waiting for a positive answer to this blunt question, Mark Webster quickened his pace; but Black Jack had no real intention of dropping out of the game where the stakes promised to run so high for the winners and was close upon his heels when the Red Rock Sport reached the hotel entrance.

Fortune seemed in their favor, just then, for Major Napoleon Nipkins was too busy with a couple of guests to take heed of their silent motions, and, without attracting unwelcome notice, the two burglars ran that gauntlet in perfect safety.

Once inside the hotel, the rest seemed easy enough, thanks to a certain handy tool habitually carried by Webster, added to the fact that Jonathan Muckajack was away dancing attendance at the heels of Lycurgus Dentatious, that bibulous detective.

Quickly opening the locked door, then, the two footpads, now transformed into a brace of burglars, lost precious little time in "going through" that apartment.

With the single exception of a couple of substantial valises, the chamber contained nothing beyond the usual limited supply of furniture to be found in a country hotel; and ten minutes sufficed to search every place in the room which would be at all likely to receive aught of importance in the way of documents or other personal property, save and except these two gripsacks.

"Ef it's hyar at all, she must be in one o' them durn bags, muttered Black Jack, kicking the nearest valise. "Slit 'em wide, an' le's be gittin' out o' hyer. Makes my hair creep, jest to think o' that durn major with his double-durnder scatter-gun!"

Mark Webster was already bending over the grips, but he sprung erect just then, a low, hissing sound escaping his lips as he made a savage gesture toward his comrade.

From without there came sounds of footsteps, and then a short, rasping hawk-hawking, such as a slightly asthmatic person makes to clear his throat.

"The other Muckajack, by blazes!" gratingly whispered the gambler, as he recognized that sound. "Coming here, too!"

"Shell we do him up?" huskily asked the hostler, gripping a knife.

"Not that way, but—grab the grips and stand ready to make a dash for it!" just as swiftly whispered the gambler, his dark eyes glowing redly, crouching close beside the door-casing and silently swinging a "billy" in his nervous right hand. "I'll down him, then make a break for the back way—sabe?"

There was time for nothing more. The door was opened, and as the second Muckajack stepped over the threshold, Webster struck swiftly and surely, felling his man like one smitten by lightning, then grabbing one of the valises and hurrying away, closely followed by Black Jack.

They gained the outer air without being seen, so far as they knew.

CHAPTER XX.

PLANNING TO TRAP FAIR GAME.

THERE was no lack of gossiping-matter in Red Rock Bar, the day following the events last recorded.

The ill-fortunes of the cousins Muckajack supplied the food so dear to idle tongues, and hardly one of those taking part in the different discussions but had a solution to offer his fellows.

Jonathan Muckajack had not long lain insensible from that ugly blow, and when his scattered wits did return, he lost precious little time in giving the alarm, never stopping to take breath until he had every one in or about the hotel fully upon the alert.

He could only proclaim the fact of the brutal assault, pointing to his lacerated scalp as a silent yet most eloquent witness, and to add in savage rancor the robbery which both himself and cousin had suffered.

That was the full extent of his information. He had not caught even a fleeting glimpse of his assailant, that blow was so swift and so certain in its effects.

With not the slightest clue to the burglars, nothing could be done to remedy that loss; and even the doughty detective, Lycurgus Dentatious, seemed to be wholly at a loss to account for that transaction, unless it meant robbery, pure and simple.

At least, this was his open declaration, and as Jonathan was too intensely excited to listen to cool reason, while Jabez was among the missing, the really keen-witted and far-seeing detective kept his suspicions to himself for the time being.

It was not until the day dawned that poor Jabez was discovered and restored his freedom, weak and exhausted in mind as in body by those long and gruesome hours of forced inactivity.

He could barely tell his story of assault and robbery, then was put to bed with a hot sling inside him, to recuperate.

All of this furnished food for gossip in abundance, and when the stolen grips, cut open on both sides and pretty thoroughly rifled of all valuables, were found just outside the town, the decision was pretty general that both assaults had been made by non-citizens, bent on making a little stake without doing hard labor for the ducats.

Only Dentatious divined the whole truth: that this had been a bold attempt to win the missing clue to the Muckajack Mine; and he was forced to keep his own counsel until the cousins were in a more fit state to consult with him.

Mark Webster met with bitter disappointment when he came to search those stolen grips, for neither one contained the missing portion of the treasure-chart; and barring a fair amount of ready cash, they had had only their trouble and risk for their reward.

The stolen goods were hidden in a secure cache, more to still further lead astray those who would endeavor to solve the puzzle, than from any idea of ever making use of the articles.

There was nothing suspicious in the looks or the conduct of the gambler on the next day, and even those who liked him least would hardly have thought him capable of performing such foul deeds.

As a matter of course Webster reported his lack of success to Herman Smokehouse, and after discussing the subject pretty thoroughly, they reached the conclusion that neither of the Muckajack cousins had secured any part or portion of that divided chart.

This left the matter lying between Dirk Ingalls and Amabel La Grange, if the missing fragments were really in Red Rock Bar.

So, at least, the allies reasoned, and, as a natural result, it was decided that Smokehouse should pay a visit of condolence to the wounded man beneath the friendly roof of the gambler.

Dirk Ingalls looked far better than he had the evening before, his long sleep having greatly strengthened him, and his wounds presenting a more favorable aspect, according to the report of the doctor in attendance.

Mark Webster introduced the men, and as Ingalls showed more coolness than cordiality, more suspicion than trust, the gambler frankly told him all about the rivalry existing between the two Red Hats.

"You can't begin to hate that devil like this gentleman does," he argued. "And I'm going his bail, pardner; I'm saying that he'll wade to his lips through blood and fire rather than let that villain crow much longer or much louder!"

"I mean to down him on my own hook," coolly avowed Smokehouse, "but if I can help you any in squelching him, so much the better for both of us, isn't it?"

"You see, Dirk, I've been thinking it all over since our talk of last evening," frankly declared the gambler. "I made up my mind that it was just a little bigger contract than I cared to handle by my lonesome, and so I just took Smokehouse into our confidence."

"You told him—"

"Yes, I told him," quickly cutting short that angry sentence. "For one thing, he hates this Cunningham fully as bitterly as we do. For another thing, he is the very person we need to manipulate the Lady of the Black and Red."

"Curse her! If I was only able—if I could only follow the plan I had all laid out when that infernal fool filled me full of lead!"

"Can't we take your place, though, Dirk?"

"Tell me what to do, and I'll carry it out to the very letter," declared the Red Hat Sport.

"You're after a share in the big bonanza, eh?" growlingly asked the wounded knave, his eyes glowing redly up at that handsome face.

"Well, I'd hardly be fool enough to fling such a chance over my shoulder," bluntly admitted the Sport; but then adding in lower,

harsher tones: "Still, I'd go into any sort of game, clean over head and ears, on the bare chance of playing even with Richard Cunningham—devil roast him by inches!"

There was naught of acting in this vicious outburst, and that banished the last doubts Dirk Ingalls might have entertained.

Still, he was in no particular hurry to speak, and the others waited in silence, with what patience they could summon to their aid.

Presently the wounded knave raised himself on an elbow, speaking:

"From the description you gave me, Webster, I believe this Lady of the Black and Red is actually my meat; is indeed the she-cat I hoped to find in Red Rock Bar."

"If we might only fetch her here, so you could be positive?" half suggested, half mused the gambler, on a venture.

"Not any, if you please!" said Ingalls, with a savage show of his teeth and decided shake of his head. "I wouldn't fetch two cents a pound for soap-grease a minute after she was to recognize me!"

"Well, can you think of any better way?"

"Yes. I thought it all out, last night, during a spell of wakefulness," declared Ingalls, lying back the better to slip a hand inside his garments. "Will you take a squint at that, gentlemen?"

He held forth a card-sized photograph representing a young and far from unattractive man, taken a number of years before, judging from the cut of his coat and the style of wearing his hair.

Together the two men looked at the sun-picture, and Webster was the one to finally exclaim:

"Your mug, by glory! Taken years ago, of course, not much like you are now; still, I can recall the resemblance, now!"

"That was taken before you first met me, pardner, and when I was a far different sort of a man than right now," explained Ingalls, with just a tinge of sad regret in his lowered voice.

But that was of brief duration, and he added more briskly:

"If your Amabel of the Black and Red is the woman I think, one fair squint at that picture will make her betray herself!"

"And you wish one or the other of us to show her this card?" asked the Red Hat Sport, after a brief silence.

"That for a starter, yes! Will you agree to do so much for me?"

"Give us a little more light, can't you, friend?"

"Surely it isn't so difficult to comprehend; but, so be it! I wish this photograph to confront the she-cat without the slightest warning, and under such circumstances that it will be impossible for her to hide whatever emotion that sight will give birth to. Is that sufficiently clear, then?"

"So far, yes; and I cheerfully agree to spring the little surprise upon the gentle Amabel. But—what follows after? Suppose she don't take the tumble you apparently count on?"

"Then she isn't the woman I believe, and we'll have to plan anew. But my faith is strong that she is my game, and if so—"

"Well, if she should prove to be your game?"

"Take close note of all she says or does! Don't let even the veriest trifles escape you! For what may seem like trifles to you, to me might prove the very key to the whole business!"

Dirk Ingalls spoke with strong emphasis, plainly deeming that point one of the utmost importance. His earnestness impressed both the Sport and the gambler, and Smokehouse carefully stowed that pictured card away in his notebook for future use.

So far Mark Webster had contrived to hold his burning curiosity fairly well in check, but now, fancying that he had earned the right to know more, he poured out a volley of questions.

What end was to be gained through surprising Amabel La Grange by a sight of that old photograph? In what way could that surprise, granting that it fully met the anticipations of his guest, further their little play for the Muckajack Mine?

These are given as a simple sample of the questions which flowed over his lips, but to one and all of which Dirk Ingalls either gave evasive answers, or else ignored entirely.

"Time enough for the second step when we're sure of the first," he decided, with a return of the dogged resolution he had shown the gambler once before. "If your Amabel is my she-cat, then I'll tell you more, and we'll crowd our little game until we win the prize or—go broke!"

Both men plainly saw that it would be a mere waste of breath to try to shake that determination, and so they let that point drop for the present.

They spoke on various subjects for some few minutes longer, although no mention was made of the startling experience which had so recently come to the Muckajack cousins.

Mark Webster had cautioned Smokehouse in advance not to allude to either affair, lest ugly suspicions be awakened in the mind of his guest.

"It'd be just like him to fancy I was playing him dirt, don't you see?" he laughingly concluded.

Promising to faithfully set the trap for the fair game they had been discussing, the Red Hat Sport bade Ingalls adieu, leaving the house, Webster bearing him company.

They returned direct to the apartment rented by the Red Hat Sport, and over cigars and a bottle of whisky they discussed the matter pretty thoroughly.

Mark Webster told what he knew of this man in past years, but nothing in all that gave them the clue necessary to explain his supposed connection with Amabel La Grange.

After an hour so spent, Smokehouse gave a decided nod of his head, leaning across the little table to speak in low, measured tones:

"Well, pardner, I reckon I'll have to make a little business call on the fair Amabel this very evening! Want to go along? All right, then!"

CHAPTER XXI.

PLACED ON PROBATION.

ON that same evening, shortly after supper, Richard Cunningham dropped in at the post office, as had grown to be his habit of late days,

As luck would have it there were no customers in the little store, just then; a fact which the Red Hat Sport was not sorry to notice, as he was beginning to grow rather more sensitive about doing his courtship under so many pairs of curious eyes.

He caught a glimpse of Florence, over in the "post-office corner," and with a vision made preternaturally keen by true love, he saw that the girl had been crying; and from the redness of her eyes and the tip of her dainty little nose, that it had been something more than an April shower, too!

The genial smile faded from his own face at this discovery, and the Red Hat Sport would have sprung impetuously forward to cheer or console the maiden, only for the prompt action which effectually barred his way, just then.

"Excuse me, Mr. Cunningham!" at the same instant spoke Michael Cammerhan, for his was the interposing figure.

His face looked stern and forbidding, while his voice was remarkable for its utter lack of the usual cordiality.

Cunningham flushed warmly at that check, for just then it came like a slap in the face from the hand of a fair woman. He saw that something surely had gone wrong, but for an instant he failed to even suspect what had really wrought that sudden and complete alteration.

"I didn't see you, first off, sir," apologized the Red Hat, quickly. "I only saw Florence had been—"

"Miss Cammerhan, sir, to you!"

Almost harshly came that interruption, yet one who could have taken cool and impartial note of it all, would almost surely have decided that Honest Michael was playing a part foreign to his own wishes.

Richard Cunningham turned pale, for he felt that the blow was falling, although he was even yet in utter ignorance of the cause.

"I don't understand you, Cammerhan. What have I done to change you like this? Surely I am not— What does it all mean, anyway?"

"And you pretend that you don't know?"

"If I knew, would I be asking you for

more light?" a little impatiently retorted the Red Hat, again making as though he would pass the other by, to join Florence in her corner.

Richard saw that she had been roused by the sound of voices, and as her face turned that way, he caught an appealing look that would have moved a stone, much more an ardent lover.

But the postmaster put forth a hand, pushing him back, speaking in quick, stern tones, as he made that motion:

"No, you don't, sir! All that's past and gone, and until you can perfectly clear your skirts, you can't have anything more to do with my poor little girl!"

His face now painfully white, and his voice grown husky, Cunningham once more made the demand for more light.

"Do you mean that all is over—that I mustn't even speak to your daughter, sir? If so—tell me just what you do mean, then!"

"I'm sorry to hurt your feelings, sir," said the postmaster, with a little catch in his voice, "but there's only the one thing to do and to say: until you can look every honest man squarely in the face—"

"I can do that right now, Mr. Cammerhan!" cut in the Red Hat Sport, but pausing in obedience to the lifting hand of the postmaster.

"Wait, please, until I've said my say out, Mr. Cunningham. What I mean is just this: so long as you rest under suspicion of robbery, I can't permit you to keep company with my little girl: so there!"

Richard flinched as though dealt a stinging blow full in the face. And that face turned red, only to fade into an ashen white, as he saw how Florence was bending that way, plainly catching every word of that bitter insult.

It seemed an insult, then, although Michael really felt the blow almost as keenly as did the one toward whom it was directed.

Quickly rallying, the Red Hat Sport spoke in husky tones:

"I know now what you're driving at, sir, but I swear to you, as man to man, as one standing on probation for more than his life, that I am as innocent of the crime now being laid at my door as the babe unborn!"

He spoke as he looked, and the postmaster had to clap both hands behind his back in order to refrain from meeting the one Cunningham was offering.

"I believe it—I do honestly believe it's all a pack of infernal lies!" Cammerhan declared.

"Then why do you say that—that I mustn't think more of my—of your daughter, sir?"

"If I was all the town, but I'm not, and that ought to be plain enough for you to see without my pointing it out," said Cammerhan, with a touch of anger entering his voice. "Already the people are talking, and that surely isn't going to do my girl any good. You know that, Mr. Cunningham."

"I know that people will mighty soon have something better to talk about, if I can catch any of the infernal gossips worrying over my name," almost savagely vowed the Red Hat Sport.

"You'd make a bad matter worse by mixing up Flo's name in your own trouble," gravely interposed the postmaster. "No, sir; there is just this much about it: until you can clear away every shade of suspicion from your name: until you can plainly prove that you had nothing whatever to do with holding up that stage, you've got to quit coming here!"

"Do you mean that I must not see your daughter at all, sir?"

"Isn't it better not? Of course it is, sir! And so I repeat: prove your freedom from all wrong, and I'll say no more. But, until you can do precisely that, Mr. Cunningham, I must ask you as a gentleman, to keep entirely away from my daughter, either here or elsewhere."

Gravely and earnestly spoke the father, and as he listened the lover's heart sunk lower and lower. After such an appeal to his honor, how could he fail to obey? And yet—how could he break off the tie which was growing so dear, so precious?

Before he could find words to even partly express his feelings, the maiden left her little corner, coming swiftly forward, evad-

ing the hand which Cammerhan instinctively flung forth to bar her way, pausing only when standing close in front of the Red Hat Sport.

A glad light leaped into his big blue eyes at this, for he could see no change in her dear face, so far as her love for him was concerned.

It was all he could do to refrain from clasping her form to his bosom, but refrain he did, though he quickly spoke:

"You don't deem me guilty, darling?"

"I know you are not guilty, Richard," came the instant response.

"Daughter!"

"Wait, father," and her little hand gently pushed back Michael's arm as she added: "I'm not forgetting, daddy, but you must let me say just this much: that I have full and perfect faith in your honor, Richard Cunningham! That I have faith all will come out right in the end!"

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed the Sport, huskily, his bright eyes somehow dim as they looked upon that fair face.

"I couldn't let you be turned away, dear, without telling you I held full faith in your honor," simply repeated Florence, tears in her eyes, a quaver in her voice, but a brave and loving smile playing about her red lips.

"I trust you now, as I have trusted you in the past, Richard. I will trust you ever, because I have full faith that my trust will never be betrayed. And—have patience, for truth is mighty and must prevail."

Richard brightened up wonderfully at this more than kindly speech, but, man-like, he wanted yet a little more!

Taking her little hand and dropping a warm kiss upon it, he said:

"I'll never forget your kind words, Florence! I'll never rest easy until I have cleared away these ugly clouds and proved my perfect innocence in the face of all mankind!"

"I believe you will succeed, and my prayers will not be lacking to that end," gently spoke the maiden, withdrawing her hand, warned by the uneasy frown now settled over the face of her parent.

"And when I have fairly cleared myself of suspicion, Florence?"

"I'll be the first to offer you my hand in sincere congratulation."

"And—your heart, dearest?" eagerly whispered the Sport, paying no attention to the postmaster, now growing decidedly uneasy.

A swift blush rose to that fair face, and the girl visibly shrunk. But then, like one unable longer to resist the loving impulse, she murmured:

"That is no longer mine to give, Richard!"

Only the keen ears of a true lover could have caught the full meaning of that whisper, but before Cunningham could take advantage of that thinly-veiled confession, Florence turned and fled in rosy confusion back to her cozy corner, while the sturdy figure of Michael Cammerhan once more barred the way to her lover.

"Enough's been said, if not too much," was his blunt declaration. "Don't you make a bad matter worse by trying to crowd in, sir. As I told you before, wait until you're clear of all suspicion, then we'll be glad to welcome you back. Until then—stay away from me and mine!"

This left no room for misapprehension, and with his spirits beginning to sink again, Richard Cunningham turned slowly away from the post-office, feeling pretty much like one banished from paradise!

He almost came into collision with several of the miners who were going to their customary "dish of gossip," but he paid no attention to the greetings they gave, striding on with no definite idea as to where he was bound.

Oddly enough, perhaps, the Red Hat Sport had given that absurd accusation hardly a passing thought after so clearly proving an *alibi* for the night of the robbery.

Knowing that he was innocent, with a soul free from any deeper soil or stain than that of an occasional gambling bout, Cunningham never once dreamed of such a result as this; and coming so entirely unexpected, the blow fell all the more heavily.

Forbidden to even speak to his true love until he had cleared away even the shadow of suspicion! And how could that be done without bringing to light the actual criminal?

Since those trained detectives had failed so completely, where was he to look for the robber? What possible clue—Ha!

Those broken words gasped forth by the drunken knave whom he kept from murdering Michael Cammerhan: that allusion to a red hat! Surely—

"It's Herman Smokehouse for your life!" fairly exploded Cunningham as sudden conviction flashed upon his busy brain. "He turned the trick, and fixed it so as to cast ugly suspicion my way! I just know it, now!"

So it seemed in the first heat of that inspiration, but as Cunningham gradually cooled off, striving to fit facts to his new theory, the serious obstacles he had to contend with grew more and more obstinate.

Finally feeling that he was too thoroughly shaken up to puzzle the matter out, he forced it out of mind as best he could, and in order to keep from worrying over the affair, he turned his steps toward the tent where Amabel La Grange presided over the table devoted to *Rouge et Noir*.

He had no intention of playing, that night, merely wishing to distract his thoughts until his shocked wits could have time to rally; but scarcely had he touched that threshold than a startling surprise met him, offering another enigma for solution.

CHAPTER XXII.

A GAY LITTLE SKIRMISH.

As by instinct the eyes of the Red Hat Sport turned toward that section of the tent where stood the table given over to the Black and Red, only to find it comparatively deserted; something very unusual at that hour of the evening.

A dealer was seated in the usual place, but it was a man, not the woman known to Red Rock Bar as Amabel La Grange, and who was the only person Cunningham had ever found occupying that position.

This was surprise number one, and the second came almost instantly.

Near the further end of that long inclosure a considerable crowd had gathered, and Richard gave a low ejaculation of surprise as he saw the woman-sport seated at a card-table, evidently engaged at "short cards" with a number of men!

There was no room for mistaking that shape; almost regal in its superb contour, with those rich gems flashing back the rays from the suspended lamps at each and every motion Madame La Grange made.

It was less easy to distinguish her present companions, but a little bit later, as he stepped into the room, Richard Cunningham caught sight of a peculiar head-gear; a red hat, almost precisely like the one which rested upon his own brown locks!

He recognized his rival, the other claimant for the odd honor of being the Red Hat Sport.

"Smokehouse! And playing poker with her!"

So Cunningham mentally ejaculated as he moved slowly forward, his curiosity now thoroughly awakened.

How often, of late, had the fair Amabel told him of her strong aversion to his rival Red Hat! How often had she declared that under no consideration could or would she treat him as a friend or an equal! And now—to engage in play with him, before all those curious eyes!

With such reflections as these Cunningham watched the game, almost unconsciously taking note of the other parties engaged.

One was Mark Webster, the "crooked" gambler. Another was a rakish looking stranger, just back of whose chair stood the burly hostler in the employ of the Express stables, "Black Jack" Tudor.

Not a little to his surprise Richard likewise took note of the presence of his two partners in the "Ready Penny," not as players, but as interested spectators.

That recognition was mutual, and leaving his station, Mountain Mark quietly came to

join the Red Hat, speaking in low tones, so as not to disturb or annoy yonder gamesters.

"I don't wonder you look surprised, Dick," was his beginning, giving a little nod in the direction of the Red and Black Queen. "It's one pretty generally shared by all of us, as you can see for yourself."

"What does it mean? She never seemed to neglect her regular business, so far as I could see; but now—playing in public, and with that infernal cur, too!"

"Sh h!" warned Mansfield, quickly. "You don't want to give folks a chance to say that you tried to pick a row with a sick man, Dick?"

"Sick, nothing!" with a dark frown of dislike as he ran eyes over that trimly-garbed, athletic shape, yonder. "He looks as though he might get away with his regular rations, anyway!"

"That's all true enough, far as it goes; but he's not more than half a man, now. Remember, this is his first appearance in public since you laid him up in lavender, Dick."

"Well, he's in clover, now!"

Mountain Mark gave a low chuckle at this real or fancied touch of jealousy; but then he completed the examination he had begun before this branching-off.

"It just happened that Old Steve and I came in here for a bit, and were in time to see how it came about," he said in a whisper, as they both stood watching the players.

"Smokehouse had been bucking her game after a tolerably lively fashion, I fancy, from what we heard. Anyway, he was just quitting in disgust, as we came in, saying that he wasn't knee-high to a hop-toad at the Red and Black, but that he could give any one, man or woman, points and a beating at draw!"

"The insolent cur!"

"Well, it did sound rather insulting, for a fact," admitted Mountain Mark, "It was just on the tip of my tongue to say as much, when the lady caught him up; his looks, his tones, or his manner—one or all combined... seemed to sting her to the quick."

"She declared that she dealt strictly on the square, as no man knew better than herself; but that she feared not to meet him at his own choice, without asking any odds, either."

"More plucky than prudent, I imagine! That rascal would skin his great-grandmother if he got half a chance!"

"Well, she's held him level so far," chuckled Mansfield, still watching the game with deep interest. "If Red Hat hopes to end this evening a winner, reckon he'll have to back up his luck with science!"

"If he tries that game on, it'll be his last game for a few nights, pardner!" grimly muttered the rival Red Hat, moving a little closer to the card-table, where Herman Smokehouse was just shuffling the deck for a fresh deal.

Whether by chance, or through intention on his own part, the Red Hat Sport was seated with his back to the front entrance, and deeply absorbed as he was with the game, he had so far failed to take note of the latest arrival.

Mark Webster was in a better position for such an observation, but he, too, had more important matters to wholly occupy his attention.

He was keenly, if covertly, watching every move made by the Queen of the Red and Black.

For one thing, he was a gambler, born and bred. That means he played to win, every time, no matter whether the stake was a mere trifle or a little fortune. As he frequently declared, himself, he "would rather win and pay, than lose and be paid for!"

Amabel had so far shown herself no novice at the game, although this was her first public appearance as an exponent of the art of "draw poker," and as Mountain Mark had told Cunningham, she was a little more than holding her own against the Red Hat and his confederates.

Smokehouse had been first surprised, then piqued by her evident knowledge of the game; but hoping to make good his rude slur when quitting *Rouge et Noir*, he delayed springing the trap which he had so carefully prepared.

That delay had cost him quite a few dollars, already, and now the schemer felt an additional interest in what was so soon to come.

Unlike Webster, he was a "poor loser," and this trait lent a touch of malice to his other interests.

With one who had made a life-study of the art, Smokehouse had found it easy enough to introduce an extra card to the pack they had been using, and that without exciting suspicion in the Lady of the Red and Black.

It was just as easy for him to "make the pass" after the deck was cut, thus leaving the cards arranged precisely as before; and then he deftly ran off the requisite number to each person engaged in the game.

A covert signal warned Mark Webster that the trap was being laid, but naught in either face gave Amabel warning, although she was keeping close watch of all moves made.

Ready cash took the place of chips at that table, and the customary moves were made; none of the hands were thrown up, but each in rotation made their discard, calling for cards to fill.

Then it was that Smokehouse completed his little trap, giving Amabel two cards from the top, and adding the third from the bottom.

The woman coolly lifted her cards, after making sure she had been given the exact number called for; but right there her coolness ended.

Instead of an ordinary card such as they had been playing with up to now, the face of a young and handsome man was smiling up at her!

Smokehouse had removed the film from the card given him by Dirk Ingalls, then neatly gummed it upon a split playing-card.

Like one suddenly turned to marble, the woman stared at the face, then gave a gasping cry as she partly rose to her feet, turning the card to catch the glow of the lamps more fully.

One terrified look, then the cards dropped to the table, face uppermost, and with a choking scream as of one in mortal agony, the woman staggered back from the table, her arms flung upward, her limbs giving way beneath her weight.

She would have fallen heavily to the floor, only for the swift action taken by Cunningham, whose strong arms caught and upheld her.

The rival Red Hat gave a sharp cry at this unexpected appearance, but then rallying quickly, he cried out in fierce derision:

"Aha, my gallant Don Juan! Careful, sir! if you take this love to the other lady, you may lose them both, for—"

"Silence, you cowardly cur!" thundered Cunningham, with pointed finger, as he supported the swooning woman upon his good right arm. "I made you whine like a whipped hound once, and I'll do it again if you even dare to—"

"Liar!" savagely cried the Rival Red Hat, springing to his feet and kicking the chair away from behind him.

Cunningham saw that he was reaching for a gun, and with a swift motion he snatched off the crimson hat, flinging it violently into the face of his rival, at the same instant swinging the insensible Amabel around so that his own body would shield her from flying lead.

Instantly all was confusion, and the room was fairly filled with shouts and cries and resounding oaths.

Black Jack Tudor, who had borne his superiors company with the express understanding that he was to blindly back them up in everything, was among the first to draw a weapon; but close at hand was an honest fellow who could act just as swiftly, and far more effectively.

Old Steve caught the chair from which Mark Webster had risen, gripping it by the back, and striking with pitiless force as he yelled forth a warning:

"Git out o' the road, dug-gun ye, critter!"

Struck squarely on the head, Black Jack went down in a heap before he could fairly pull his gun, and letting the broken chair fly where it might, Claybridge leaped headlong at the gambler, just in time to keep him from shooting down that bold defender of injured woman.

Mark Webster went down before that human catapult, and with Old Steve fairly "in the saddle," he was past giving much more trouble, for the time being at least.

Herman Smokehouse recoiled, blinded by that novel missile, and that gave the startled Mountain Mark time to take action.

He sprung forward and caught the Red Hat by his right wrist, jerking that armed hand upward and backward with all his power.

The pistol exploded, but its load merely pierced that flimsy roof, in place of carrying instant death to the rival Red Hat.

All this took place with wonderful rapidity, and in much less time than it takes to set down the various movements; but then Richard Cunningham fell back a bit further, drawing a revolver with which to defend his own life, as well as that of the still helpless woman lying across his right arm.

Just as it bade fair to degenerate into free fight, Major Napoleon Nipkins appeared on the scene, shot-gun in hand, shrilly crying out:

"Steady, all! I do the fighting for this establishment!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S FINE WORK.

HAVING been assured by Mark Webster that the trap was going to be laid for the Lady of the Red and Black that very evening, Dirk Ingalls put in a period of very impatient waiting, left alone in the gambler's shanty.

Long before he could reasonably expect a report from the villains who had so readily entered into a vile scheme against Amabel La Grange, the wounded man lay restlessly tossing upon his bed, starting at each sound that came to his ears from without, at times fairly holding his breath in hot impatience.

Ears less keenly alert would scarcely have caught the faint echo of those advancing footsteps, but Ingalls was lifted upon an elbow, with eyes glowing redly as they fixed upon the door, a few moments later.

Without knock or other warning, the barrier swung open, showing a tall figure at the threshold; but Dirk gave a short, fierce gasp as he saw that it was neither Webster nor the Red Hat Sport.

He let his head fall back upon his pillow in his vicious disappointment, and as though taking that as a mute invitation to enter, the man stepped inside, quickly closing the door at his back.

Dirk Ingalls failed to recognize this intruder, and before he could fairly make up his mind to demand credentials, the man advanced toward the bed, with a bland smile spreading over his countenance.

"Glad to see you looking so vastly improved, my dear Mr. Ingalls!" declared Lycurgus Dentatious, at the same time drawing a chair forward and taking a seat near the bed.

"I don't—who in blazes might you be, anyhow?" growlingly demanded the wounded man, shrinking just a trifle from that peculiar smile, yet just as clearly at a loss when he tried to recognize his visitor.

"Well, I might be an angel, only for the want of wings. I might be Satan, if I only had hoofs, horns and a forked tail. I might be—"

"You might be a hunk of cold meat if you don't show cause!" harshly retorted Ingalls, a flush of anger darkening his bruised face.

"Is that so? Well, now, my dear fellow, if that means anything, it means for me to get down to solid old business, don't it?"

"Who are you? What do you want here? I don't know you from any other guzzling son-of-a gun!"

"Well, there's one consolation, my dear fellow: you'll soon be wiser. And as a gentle starter, pray, what little game brought you here to Red Rock Bar, Mr.—ah—Ingalls?"

"What business is that of yours?"

One moment the detective was smiling, bland, looking as though butter would hardly melt in his mouth; the next instant all was changed, and frowning sternly he leaned forward, speaking sharp and swiftly:

"What have you done with that portion of the Muckajack chart, Dirk Ingalls?"

The wounded man shrunk back as though from a vicious blow, a half-wild look coming into his eyes as they stared into that strong face before him.

Then a hoarse, ugly sound rose in his

throat, and he slipped a hand swiftly toward the revolver which never left him, day or night.

Lycurgus Dentatious readily divined the full meaning of that movement, but he made no effort to check hand or match weapon, showing his big white teeth in a cynical smile as he coolly drawled forth the words:

"Are you in such a hurry to pull hemp, my dear fellow?"

Dirk Ingalls gripped his pistol tightly, bringing it partly forward; but then he paused instead of shooting, as he surely would have done in case this cool hand had attempted any other defense.

"I'll blow you clean over the range!"

"Oh, don't!" drawled the detective, seemingly wholly at ease. "Take thought to your own sweet self, my boy. Just fancy how ridiculous you would look, half-way up a tree, kicking the thin ether!"

"What're you after, anyway? For two cents I'd— Steady! Make a move and I'll raise your roof!"

"When Judge Lynch would raise you—by the neck!" retorted the detective, easily. "Come, my good fellow; put up that gun of yours and let's get down to sober business."

At a loss just what to make of this daredevil stranger, Dirk Ingalls "hung in the wind," nervously fingering his gun, feeling as though he ought to shoot, yet dreading to make the attempt.

Seemingly gifted with the power to read faces as he might books, Lycurgus put in another shot.

"You really can't afford to take such long chances, Dirk. It's just possible that you might bowl me over—though I'm charmed—but it is dead sure you'd pay the penalty with your life. And so I repeat: put up your gun and come down to business!"

"Who are you, anyway?"

"I usually carry a bushel-measure along to hide my glorious light, but for the present— Just cast your eyes over that bit of cardboard, my gentle sinner!" lightly observed Dentatious, at the same time flipping his card forward so deftly that it came to rest squarely in front of those bloodshot eyes.

They were keen enough to take in the full meaning of those printed lines at a glance, and some of that angry color faded out of the invalid's face.

Lycurgus smiled quietly as he watched, for that face was telling more tales than its owner knew, just then; it was the face of a criminal who feels that the law-hounds have fairly opened upon his track!

He saw those fingers close more tightly upon pistol-butt, but he sat in seeming confidence, making no move toward disarming his game, or of arming himself.

Dirk Ingalls stared at that printed bit of pasteboard for a few brief seconds, then looked toward the man who had sent it forward, giving an ominous growl as he spoke again:

"You've got no business with me, sir. I'm no fugitive from the law, nor do I wish to employ a man-hunter."

"You talk as though you meant it, too, don't you?"

"I do mean it! And—you want to rack out of here while you're able to carry yourself, Mister Man!" harshly menaced Ingalls, moving the muzzle of his gun a little more nearly in line with the body of his unwelcome guest.

"Oh, I'll go, right enough; only give me time," coolly retorted the detective, seemingly at ease as to the outcome.

"The time's right now, and so—you git!"

"I'm going to get—what I came here after, first!" sharply said the detective. "I want what you stole from Abraham—will you?"

With a harsh exclamation Dirk Ingalls swung his pistol around, meaning to shoot for blood; but Detective Dentatious was merely playing with his man, and swift as thought itself he caught both hand and weapon, checking the one and hindering the explosion of the other.

With apparent ease he wholly disarmed the wounded man, tossing the revolver beyond his reach, then clapping a firm palm over lips as he forced Ingalls back upon his pillow.

"Don't fetch still worse upon yourself, you ass!" he muttered, sternly, gazing into

those furious eyes with magnetic power, not unlike that displayed by a wild beast tamer. "Be quiet! Try to yelp louder than a whisper, and I'll let all Red Rock know for what you're wanted, back East."

Even when at his very best, Dirk Ingalls would hardly have been a fair match for the Bohemian detective; but now he was weak from hurts, and already exhausted by his vain struggles.

Dentatious slackened his grip as he felt those muscles relax, once again giving crisp warning.

"Play white, and I'll let you off easily, old man; but act the fool, and I'll clap the darbies on and rush you back to serve the State!"

"I don't—I never—"

"You do, you did, you will," declared the detective, with a partial return of his brisk geniality of a few minutes earlier. "I'm out here in this wooden country expressly on your account. I hold a regular warrant for your arrest, and if I don't serve it, 'twill be because you make it better worth my while to withhold it; *sabre* that, John?"

"I'll never go!" gasped Ingalls, trembling like a leaf as he lay so utterly helpless, glaring up at that mocking face. "Never alive!"

"Oh, yes, you will, if I say so, my dear fellow. But—shall I say the word? Or would you rather buy me off?"

"I don't—I swear you've hold of the wrong man, sir! I'll take my oath there isn't even the ghost of a charge against me!"

"It will prove to be a remarkably substantial ghost, Dirk, if you oblige me to back my assertions up with the papers," declared Dentatious, losing something of his mockery, and looking very business-like as he drew a little nearer his shivering prey.

"Of course it's my sworn duty to place you under arrest, Ingalls, now I've run you fairly down; but—there is another duty which I consider comes in first: the duty I owe my clients, who are paying me their good money in great gobs!"

There was something more than a hint lying back of those clearly enunciated words, but a hint of such nature as to repel rather than attract the wounded knave.

He cast a longing glance toward his pistol, gave a faint groan of vicious despair, then doggedly mumbled:

"What is it you want, curse you?"

"First, to perform the duty I owe my clients—and my interesting family! And in order to do that, Dirk, I'll say it over once more: I am here to recover what you stole from Abraham Muckajack!"

"I never stole—"

"That's a lie, and we both know it! Now, where is your segment of the chart showing how to find the Muckajack Mine?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SMOKEHOUSE UNDER THE DROP.

SHARP and clear rung out these words, and as though by instinct all eyes turned toward the front entrance, there to behold the gallant major with the drop; and holding it right well, too!

His famous shotgun had both hammers lifted, and those twin eyes of steel seemed to cover one and all of the persons engaged in that little racket at the further end of the room.

"Keep your linen on, gentlemen!" challenged the landlord, slowly swinging the muzzle of his gun from side to side, the more surely to impress the moral he was reading the party. "Try to kick against the law and gospel as I'm laying of it down to ye, and over the range you go, jest a-kiting!"

His big eyes said "shoot" even more distinctly, and knowing what a terrible swath that double charge of buckshot could cut through their ranks, the ones thus menaced ceased their operations at once.

"Now, then, what's all this bobbery about?" demanded the major, lifting his cheek from the stock, but still keeping his weapon at a level. "Don't all howl at once, but—you tell, Cunningham!"

The Red Hat Sport was spared the necessity of explaining, just then, for the Lady of the Red and Black rallied from her brief

swoon, and giving one half-bewildered glance around that crowd, uttered a sharp, gasping cry as she recognized Herman Smokehouse.

That face brought all back to her mind, and she impulsively sprung forward to the card-strewn table, where her own strange hand lay as she had thrown it.

That photograph lay uppermost, and after a brief look at the pictured face, Amabel caught up the card for a closer inspection.

She quickly saw how it was arranged, and with a low, choking cry she flashed forth a silver-plated revolver and thrust its muzzle fairly into the face of the false Red Hat, crying out:

"That's your trick, cowardly cur! Now—explain or die!"

The witnesses fell apart, leaving woman to confront man, and for the time being Major Nipkins and his scatter-gun were both forgotten.

Taken completely by surprise, Smokehouse flinched from that menacing muzzle, lifting an elbow to guard his head and face while his other hand mechanically felt for a weapon.

A threatening growl broke from the spectators, and it needed not a second look to assure the Red Hat that he could not draw gun or knife just then without paying penalty with his life.

"Explain, you pitiful hound!" sternly repeated the woman, actually tapping his arm with the revolver, making him lower that instinctive guard. "Where did you get that picture? Who gave it you? What made you think of turning such a trick?"

Herman Smokehouse was not wholly devoid of nerve, else he could never have reigned a chief in Red Rock for so many months.

Still, he was one who could show more nerve with only a woman to face, and now he let a sneer curl his heavy mustache as he met that glowing gaze, his arm lowering, his figure squaring about,

"What is it you expect me to say, madam?"

Amabel thrust forward that card, showing the face as she asked:

"Who is this man, you cur?"

That half-smile expanded to an open sneer as the Red Hat retorted:

"Well, my dear, you certainly appeared to recognize that face, and I am of the opinion you can give that information far better than I can."

"Who is this man, you cur?" sternly repeated the Lady of the Red and Black, her dark eyes flashing as though fairly on fire. "Speak, or by all that's vile and contemptible, I'll send you post-haste to your master, the foul fiend!"

A little murmur of admiration ran through the crowd, showing that, almost without exception, they were in favor of the fairer if not the weaker champion, just then.

Of those exceptions, Mark Webster leaned against a corner post, weak and ill, showing most unmistakably the punishment which Old Steve had measured forth during that brisk little skirmish.

Black Jack still lay as he had fallen before that deftly-wielded chair, no one seeming to care whether he was dead, or merely insensible.

If there were others present who favored the Red Hat, they were too wise to make any open exhibition of that partisanship, just then.

On the contrary, there were others who openly gloried in the public discomfiture of the notorious Red Hat, and some who looked as though they would cheerfully take all further trouble off the woman's hands.

Among these may be instanced the rival Red Hat, Richard Cunningham.

He had stooped to recover his head-gear, and now stood at ease, both hands lightly resting at his waist, neither touching weapon as yet, but in such a position that he could draw on the instant.

Herman Smokehouse took all this in as he made that one glance over the scene, and he lost a trifle of his insolent airiness as he realized the truth that all odds were against him in this battle with a woman.

Still, he dared not show the white feather so long as he saw even the ghost of a chance to bluff his way through; and calling up all his nerve, he made reply:

"You're asking entirely too much, now, madam, for I don't know."

"You lie! You are a liar, Herman Smokehouse!" fiercely cried the lady with the drop, menacing him with her weapon.

"Prove me one, and I'll admit your perfect right to so brand me," the Red Hat forced his lips to utter with outward composure. "I say it again: I don't know who the original of that face is, or was."

Amabel La Grange seemed just a bit taken aback by that dogged persistence, although she felt morally certain the fellow was falsifying.

"I will prove it, sir! And, when proven, I'll write it in letters of red across your brow, so that even the curs that skulk in the kennel may recognize and avoid you!" she cried, passionately. "For the last time, I say—talk or die!"

Smokehouse saw that this was no empty threat. He saw that he must yield a point, either in reality or in cunning semblance, else his life would be snuffed out like a candle.

"I can talk, if that's all you want; but—"

"I want the truth, and I mean to have it, too!"

"I've already given you the truth, madam, but you refuse to accept it as such," was the swift retort. "I swear that I haven't the ghost of an idea whom that picture is supposed to represent."

"Where did you get the photograph, then?"

"From a stranger."

"Be careful, you cur!"

"You demanded the truth, and that's what I'm giving you," doggedly.

"What made you try such a trick upon me, if you didn't know more than you are now pretending?"

"That's different, and I can talk enough along those lines," asserted the Sport, with an air of relief. "It happened just like this, you see, madam; merely the outcome of a little wager on nerve."

"Go on. Tell the whole story, and I'll pay you according to your truth," coldly spoke the woman-sport.

"Well, we happened to get to discussing pure grit, or clean nerve, as between women and men. This stranger—"

"What stranger? Give his name and—"

"Wait a bit, please. We were talking idly, as I said, and, as a specimen of woman's nerve, I took the liberty of instancing you, dear madam!"

Amabel frowned at his bow, motioning for him to speak on.

"He laughed at the idea, and offered to lay me long odds that you were no exception to the general rule: that you would scare at a shadow, provided that shadow should come at you without warning."

"Of course, I denied his theory, for your holding the tough sports level, as you ever have done here in Red Rock, was sufficient proof to me that you were gifted with remarkable nerve; and, so believing, I stated as much in answer to his scoffs."

"Whom are you talking about, Mr. Smokehouse?" again demanded Amabel La Grange.

"To a stranger in town, as I said before," was the cool evasion. "I stuck to my belief in spite of his jeers at my weak credulity, and when the fellow actually shook his wad in my face, of course I had to back up my faith with my pocketbook, and the wager was made."

"In what terms?"

"Well, he said that he would risk his good money on the shadow theory, and when I asked his full meaning, he showed me that picture. He said for me to fix it on a playing-card, and bring it before you suddenly, letting nothing give you premature warning."

"He said that if you didn't lose all the nerve you ever boasted, at first glimpse of that sun-shadow, then the pot was mine. I laughed at his folly, and bantered him to double the stake. He gratified me, and—well, I reckon I've lost my good money!"

With the conclusion of that glib explanation Smokehouse gave a short, insulting laugh, which brought the hot color to that beautiful face. He seemed safe in delivering that covert insult, but that was not the first mistake the Red Hat Sport had made, of more recent days.

Amabel La Grange grew cold and stern once more, still holding the gambler under the drop, speaking in crisp, menacing tones:

"I have listened to your idle babble quite long enough, Hiram Smokehouse. Now—business! Quit lying, and talk straight. Who is this stranger you have been speaking about? Tell me, or I'll blow your brains to the four winds of heaven!"

"If you were anything but a woman! If a man was to dare talk to me after that fashion, I'd know better how to answer him!"

At that the other Red Hat Sport stepped forward, speaking quickly:

"May I say it all over, as your mouth-piece, Miss La Grange?"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LADY LAYS DOWN THE LAW.

THERE was not even the suspicion of brag or bluster to be attached to that move. It was a simple business proposition, and not one who saw the Red Hat Sport right then could doubt his perfect ability to fill the position.

Despite his audacity, Herman Smokehouse turned a good bit paler; but he was spared the necessity of either accepting that thinly veiled challenge or showing the snowy plumage, by the prompt action of Amabel La Grange.

With a swift gesture she forbade the Red Hat from going further, backing up that motion with quickly uttered words.

"Thanks for your friendly offer, Mr. Cunningham, but I imagine I am fully competent to enforce my demands, so long as they are based upon common justice."

The Sport bowed, gravely, then spoke in his turn:

"Your will is my law, here, Miss La Grange. I only thought to save you further trouble, and at the same time prove to him that he had better choose his words with a trifle more judgment unless he holds himself ready to back them up with deeds."

Cunningham gave another slight bow, this time directed toward Herman Smokehouse, as though determined to leave no room for doubt as to his full meaning.

"Again my thanks, sir, but just now I believe I know how to hold my end level. Later on, if you like; of course I have naught to do with what may take place outside this establishment."

Lady Amabel spoke with added coldness, and there was a little more color than usual in Cunningham's face as he fell back to his former position. He felt that he had received a decided rebuff, just when he thought to best serve this fair one in distress: never an agreeable sensation!

Without giving him a second glance, the Lady of the Red and Black again covered Smokehouse with her revolver, speaking in coldly distinct tones:

"For the last time, sir, speak out! Name this stranger you are trying to hide behind, or—by the stars above us, I'll kill you as one destroys a venomous serpent!"

There was no room left for doubting her perfect sincerity, now, and humiliating though he must have found it, the Red Hat schemer had no option save to yield; but, luckily for Smokehouse, a friend chipped in just at that critical moment.

Seeing that the truth must be told, Mark Webster stepped to the front, making the best of a bad bargain, doing all he could to save the credit of his partner.

"Begging your pardon, Miss La Grange, but if I may be so bold—"

"What right have you to interfere, sir?" sharply demanded the lady, turning those glowing eyes in that direction, but still keeping Smokehouse under the drop.

"No right at all, if you see fit to deny it," retorted the gambler, tartly. "Still, as I can tell you just who and what the stranger in question is, while Smokehouse hardly knows the fellow by sight, I fancied you wouldn't object to my letting off a bit of chin-music."

"You say you know this—this stranger, sir?" asked Amabel, her tones changing perceptibly.

Webster gave a brief chuckle before answering:

"Well, it really looks as though I'd ought

to know him, since he's turned me out of house and home."

"What do you mean? Whom are you talking about?"

"Dirk Ingalls is the name he gives, but whether that is his own, or merely a handle taken to fit the occasion, I'll never tell you!"

"Where is he, now?"

"At my shack, waiting for the result of his little wager on nerve with Smokehouse, here. And—well, if he was laughing in his sleeve at the nice little job he put up on us, I wouldn't wonder a bit!"

Like one who wishes to inject a trifle more lightness into a gloomy scene, the gambler forced a laugh himself.

It fell flat. There was no echo to it. All seemed waiting to see what the Lady of the Red and Black would do or say further.

There was a brief silence, then Amabel spoke again:

"Where did this man come from? How long has he been your guest?"

Webster made brief reply, touching only upon the main points, and saying nothing as to his actual reasons for offering the injured knave shelter and a bed.

Miss La Grange listened intently, but there was naught in her face to show how much belief she was giving the glib-tongued gambler.

When he ceased his explanation, she gave him a frigid little bow, then spoke coldly, quite as much to the assembly at large as to any one person in particular.

"I shall make it a point to look deeper into this matter, gentlemen. Until I have done that, and can speak with better understanding than I can just now, please excuse me! Later on I will give an explanation to those who may be worthy it; until then I ask a suspension of judgment."

"Shall I have the honor of conducting you to my shack, Miss La Grange?" asked Webster, with a forced smile. "This fellow is—"

"I'll not trouble you so far, sir," was the curt interruption.

Amabel turned toward Major Napoleon Nipkins, who had lowered his shot-gun when fairly convinced that its argumentative powers were not likely to be demanded, and gradually drawn closer to the center of interest.

A winning smile softened her features, and her voice was music itself when she said:

"Will you act as my escort for the present, major?"

"If anybody says I won't, and gladly, you just send him to me for a certificate as boss liar, ma'am!"

"Thanks! And now, one and all, gentlemen," the Lady of the Red and Black added, flashing her brilliant orbs over that little assembly. "Remember that this is my quarrel, and I propose to carry my end of it from now to the finish!"

"You all saw how it was forced upon me by a foul, underhand, sneaking trick! You can only give a faint guess as to just how devilish that trick was, although I'm trying to hope the hour is nigh at hand when you may know all—everything!"

Her clear tones grew a bit muffled as she spoke, and she broke off for the moment, lest she still further betray her strong emotions.

Just the semblance of a cheer came from her sympathizers, and that nearly all might safely be counted under that head, was fairly proven by the manner in which Smokehouse and Webster were left standing alone, all others falling back or to either side.

A flush of gratitude came into that fair face, and Amabel bowed her recognition of that silent yet significant testimony. It lent her just the stimulus she most needed, and she spoke again, clearly and distinctly:

"As I was saying, gentlemen, this is my quarrel. Let it spread no further among your ranks, I command you, else—I'll issue my challenge for a fight to the death, and hold the liberty-pole against all those who dare transgress!"

There was no attempt at disguising the cheer, now. It came from nearly every pair of lips represented there, and that with a hearty good-will which was an indorsement in itself.

Whether correctly or not, Richard Cun-

ningham took that pointed warning home to himself, and doffing his hat he bowed low before the Lady of the Red and Black; then spoke, gravely:

"Of course your lightest word is our law, madam, but if Herman Smokehouse feels aggrieved by my words or actions, there is one course he can take, upon which I'll be more than glad to meet him."

"There is still outstanding this matter of the red hats, and if he wishes to find out which head has the best right to wear such a gear, he can always find me at home!"

While this thinly-masked challenge was being issued, Amabel La Grange whispered a few words to the landlord, and before any reply to that speech could come from the other Red Hat, Major Napoleon Nipkins stepped briskly to the front, saying:

"Of course you both understand that there must be no further quarreling under this roof, sir, and as there's a good bit of the night left us, may I ask a favor of you?"

"What is it, major?"

"To go with this young lady and myself for a few minutes."

"May I ask whither?"

"Certainly," as he caught a slight nod from Amabel, giving him full permission to speak on. "We're going to make a little call on this wonderful Dirk Ingalls, and would like your company. Can we have it, sir?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," declared the Red Hat Sport, after a keen glance toward Herman Smokehouse.

He saw that his rival Red Hat had no intention of picking up the gauntlet he had cast down, at least just then; and despite his own sore troubles, he could not help feeling a strong interest in this peculiar affair.

Together the trio left the gaming-room, Amabel entering the hotel for a brief space to don her wraps or to make other alterations in her garb; but she did not try their patience long.

Neither she nor Richard had any very definite idea as to where the shanty owned by Mark Webster was located, but the major was better posted, leading them by the most direct route to the shelter so opportunely found by Dirk Ingalls.

Just as they drew near the shanty, its owner stepped forward to open the door with a little flourish, saying as he did so:

"Allow me to do the honors of my palatial abode, fair lady!"

Amabel stepped upon the threshold, only to pause with a low cry.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AT THE PONIARD'S POINT.

AN oil lamp was burning dimly, but it gave forth light sufficient for those keen eyes, and Amabel La Grange saw that a human being was occupying that low bed.

And yet—was it a human being, now?"

More like a corpse than one awake or sleeping looked Dirk Ingalls, just then; a grimly repulsive corpse, too! For that unearthly pallor only served to bring into higher relief those ugly cuts and bruises he had received in his rough-and-tumble scrimmage with Michael Cammerhan.

At that involuntary cry, Richard Cunningham sprung forward far enough to see what Lad so startled the woman, then he wheeled to grip the gambler by arm and throat, sternly crying:

"You hound! This is more of your foul play is it?"

Webster had caught a glimpse of that death-like shape, and he gasped a denial even as he strove to shake that grip from his throat.

"I never—so help me Heaven!"

Major Nipkins now interposed, sensibly arguing:

"Wait until it's sure enough proved, Cunningham! Maybe the fellow isn't dead, but—wait, I say!"

For a moment the Red Hat Sport hesitated, the temptation strong upon him to shake the life out of that vile schemer who was so helpless in his formidable grasp.

He cast a glance over his shoulder, to see Amabel La Grange fairly inside the shanty, moving slowly, silently toward that bed with its grim burden, more like one acting in a dream than in consciousness.

Taking advantage of the surprise Cunningham was experiencing just at present, Webster contrived to wrench his throat away from those iron-like fingers, panting forth:

"Don't—if he's dead, I lose more than you do! I never—devil claim the one who dared to chip in here!"

There was no acting in this, and Richard Cunningham was quick to realize as much.

He made no attempt to renew his grip upon that reddened neck, but spoke in a low, swift whisper:

"Steady, then, and play clean white! Try to kick over the traces, and I'll lay you out for the coroner that very instant!"

"Lord!" huskily mumbled Major Napoleon, too deeply absorbed by what was taking place inside the shanty to heed the doings of his companions out of doors. "Just look at her, will ye? Ef she hain't as much like a she-ghost as ever—then I don't want a durn red cent!"

Slowly, noiselessly, foot by foot, inch by inch, almost, Amabel La Grange was crossing that dimly illuminated room, her gaze riveted upon that death-like visage as though it held her spellbound.

She only paused when her skirts fairly touched the edge of the bed, then gradually bent over, still with that strange stare rounding her eyes.

Silently the three men stepped inside the room, but their entrance did not affect her in the least. If she heard, she paid no heed, gazing intensely as ever down upon that bruised face.

Recognition seemed dawning upon her mind, greatly altered though that face had been by passing years and unbridled dissipation.

Her breath began to come more quickly. A hand crept up to close tightly over her painfully throbbing heart, for it seemed to her that a tinge of blood was coloring that death-like mask. And then—she gave a short, fierce gasp as those heavy lids began to quiver.

It seemed as though that corpse had been called back to life by her innocent gaze, for after a few moments more those lids lifted, those bloodshot eyes were laid bare, staring dimly at first; but then a glow of recognition lit up their depths, and a hoarse, panting cry escaped the lips of Dirk Ingalls.

The strange spell was broken, and now all life, all energy, all vengeance, Amabel La Grange dropped a hand to the wounded man's bosom, crying out as she held his startled eyes with her own glittering orbs:

"Devil! Tell me—tell me where is my baby?"

The wretch shivered beneath her touch. He shrunk away as though he would seek safety in actual flight. But her hand bore more heavily upon his chest, and again came that fierce demand:

"Speak, you imp of Satan! Where is my baby girl?"

With another hoarse, inarticulate cry, Dirk Ingalls snatched at the revolver which was once more resting beneath his pillow, firing one barrel as he swung the weapon around.

The flame nearly scorched the woman's face. The smoke curled around her head and throat. But the bullet missed its mark, for that white, jewel-decked hand shot forth to close about his wrist, just in the nick of time.

Holding his armed hand thus, Amabel turned face toward the men who were just about to spring forward to her aid, her right hand gripping the ivory hilt of a dagger, to menace them with its keen point.

"Back—keep back, I say!" she cried in cold, metallic tones. "This is my game, and—"

Her words were drowned by another explosion, but again the lead was wasted, for her fingers were as of steel, her wrist gifted with ten-fold power just then.

Dirk Ingalls struggled to bring that smoking muzzle to bear upon her brain or on her heart, but forcing the weapon aside, Amabel swiftly drew the point of her dagger across his hand, cutting it to the bones, and so completely disabling the wretch that she wrested the pistol from his relaxing grip, tossing it into the further corner of the room.

A howling curse burst from his livid lips, but Amabel gave no heed, turning again toward her friends, to sharply utter:

"Keep your distance, gentlemen! This is my work, and I'll brook no interference before I've wrung the whole truth from his craven lips!"

Cunningham and Nipkins bowed to her will in silence, maintaining their positions, now that they saw how surely capable Amabel was of taking her own part; but with Mark Webster it was different.

He seemed frightened by those glittering eyes, and like one who fears his turn may come next, he only waited until her eyes turned again to the wounded wretch, then slipped silently out through the open door into the night.

It seemed as though Amabel La Grange had utterly forgotten that other ears must catch her words, for she made no effort to conceal her inquisition.

Her left hand touched that heaving chest, her right gripping the poniard, and menacing his throat with its keen point as she spoke:

"I know you, now, Milo Prewitt! I know that 'twas all a cunning lie to make me, equally with an outraged law, deem you dead in hell! And now—speak, or I'll send you home to Satan!"

"Don't—I never—mercy!"

The poniard point drew nearer his eyes, quivering above one of the red-veined balls while Amabel fiercely hissed:

"Not all at once, you devil, but inch by inch! First your eyes, and then your—"

"Mercy! Don't—I'll confess all!"

"If you try to deceive me now, you cur, I'll show you no mercy in life," declared the woman, her tones steady and growing icy cold. "Now, confess! Where is my baby girl? Is she still—alive?"

"Yes. Alive and well, when I last heard from home."

"Where is she, now? Where have you hidden her?"

"At the old home; my old home, before we met each other," came in husky accents from those livid lips.

"Where is that home? Give me the address, or—quick, Milo Prewitt!"

He mumbled something, too low and indistinct for yonder curious ears to fairly catch, but the woman seemed satisfied. At least she asked no further questions on that point, but drew back a little, though still keeping that bright blade before his sunken eyes.

"As you have spoken, so shall be your reward, Milo Prewitt," Amabel La Grange vowed, her voice cold and stern. "If you have told the truth, and I find my child once more, you may live out the rest of your span with your brother dogs; I'll never lift finger against you!"

"I've spoken the naked truth, curse you!" muttered the wounded man, beginning to pluck up courage now that death seemed to draw back.

"If you have not—if all this proves to be but another of your fiendish lies to deceive my vengeance, Milo Prewitt—if I find you have fooled me again, I swear to hunt you off the face of the earth! I swear to never let you know rest, to never take rest myself until you stand upon the gallows, there to pay the penalty so long overdue!"

The wretch showed his teeth in a wolfish snarl, but dared do no more. Even yet he felt cowed by this Nemesis of a ruined life.

Amabel La Grange drew in a long breath, brushing a hand across her brows like one trying to entirely clear away the mists. Then she added, still in firm, distinct tones, the intense earnestness of which could not well be doubted.

"You are not fit to curse this world longer, Milo Prewitt, but neither are you fit for death. Still, as you very well know, I can send you to the gallows you've so long cheated, by a simple word let fall in the right quarter."

"Haven't I told you all you wanted, she-devil?"

"Yes, and in return I'm giving you a warning which may save your miserable life," came the swift retort. "Obey my commands, and you may live on, for all of me; refuse, or neglect to profit by this warning, and you shall perish like a sheep-killing cur!"

"Stay here in Red Rock Bar for the next two weeks. If you attempt to go away before the expiration of that fortnight, those whom I mean to set as guards

over you, will at once arrest and turn you over to the hangman. Now, mind: this is my final warning, and every syllable of it is true as gospel writ!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STORY OF A RUINED LIFE.

Now that it seemed his life was safe, the wounded knave could no longer hold back his venom, and with a savage oath he vowed to play even in the end.

Amabel La Grange was turning away as he spoke, but swift as a flash she faced him, poniard still in hand, menacing him with its keen point as she sternly gave warning.

"Careful, you cur! Dare to even show your teeth at me or mine, and I'll drain your black heart dry as a withered knot! I don't know why I have spared you so long. I ought to have slain you at sight, and I'll do that even yet, if you give me the faintest excuse!"

Dirk Ingalls shrunk more from those blazing eyes, that fiercely illuminated visage, than from the menacing steel.

Disarmed, weak and impotent, he realized how totally unfit he was for fighting even a woman; and he had not even a retort ready.

Gazing at him a few seconds, Amabel La Grange gave a sneering laugh, her red lips curling in fine scorn. Then she carelessly thrust that poniard through her girdle, turning away from the bedside toward the door, near which the major and Cunningham were standing.

It hardly seemed the same woman as she forced a faint smile, speaking in milder tones:

"I owe you thanks, gentlemen, for your services so far; but I owe you still more: an explanation of all you have been forced to witness this night."

"Don't mention it, ma'am," politely begged the gallant major.

"We have done nothing to deserve your thanks, Miss La Grange," supplemented the Red Hat Sport. "If there is anything more we can do, pray command us!"

"There is this one thing more you can do for me, gentlemen," Amabel said, gently touching an arm each as her dark eyes flashed from face to face. "You can let me explain why the unexpected sight of that photograph gave me such a terrible start!"

"If you really wish to do so, of course we cannot well object," the younger man said, in a low tone which was not wholly free from doubt.

"I ask it as a favor, gentlemen," declared the woman, then passing to the open door, motioning them to follow and join her.

They did so, and as the trio passed out into the night, they brushed against a tall form, from which came a muttered apology.

It was Mark Webster, apparently returning to ascertain what fate had befallen his wounded guest.

The woman gave that incident no heed, although it was fated to be recalled to memory at no distant date.

She hurried away from the shanty, merely stating that she wished their company to the hotel, where her explanation might be made with more propriety than elsewhere.

There was little said by the way. The woman seemed suffering from the intense excitement she had so recently passed through, while the men were puzzled to know whether they ought to condole or to congratulate.

From start to finish that chain of incidents had been a startling revelation, and troubled though his brain was upon his own account, Richard Cunningham felt a strongly growing curiosity to hear that promised explanation.

Nothing further occurred to mark their retreat from the shanty, and ten minutes later the trio were seated in a room at the Golden Eagle, where Major Napoleon "held forth" when he was strictly "at home."

He brought forth a bottle of wine from his private locker, and after the Lady of the Red and Black had wet her red lips with the generous liquor, she abruptly began her life-story.

"I never thought the day would come when I'd be called upon to draw back the curtain which has for long years veiled my ruined past," she began, her tones a bit un-

steady and somewhat husky. "I would not do this now, to any friends less stanch and true; but—"

"If it is merely on our account, madam," began the Red Hat Sport; only to have his further speech checked by that white hand.

"It is a duty I owe myself, fully as much as to you, sir," came her swift correction. "You have seen and heard too much, not to learn more. I beg that you will hear me to the end, gentlemen."

"You bet we will, then, ma'am!" declared the major, nodding emphatically. "We'll hear you out ef it takes clean into the middle of next month!"

Amabel thanked the major with a little bow, but her dark eyes spoke to Cunningham when he gravely inclined his head by way of confirmation.

A brief pause, then the woman spoke on:

"It all began, years and years ago, when I was little more than an overgrown child, you must understand, my good friends. That must be my principal defense for acting so rashly, so madly!"

"I was then attending boarding-school, placed there by my loving parents, whose only child I was."

"Father was reputed an almost millionaire, and as the rumor got afloat that I was his sole heiress, you can give a guess why, even at that early age, I had—a lover!"

"You have seen him, to-night, gentlemen," she added, with a smile as bitter as were her tones in speaking of him. "Dirk Ingalls he is called here in Red Rock Bar, but back yonder he was known to me as only as Milo Prewitt, son and heir of a wealthy planter of Virginia, himself gay and debonair, handsome almost as a school-girl's dream of a demigod!"

"From an infant I had scarcely known what it was to have my will thwarted, or to be denied aught that took my fancy. And so—when the ladies in charge of the school lectured me on my folly, I merely laughed them to scorn, and—yielded to the prayers of my lover!"

The woman gave a short, hard laugh at that stage of her narrative. She seemed to scorn that silly child and its foolish fancies. Years ago the scales had fallen from over her eyes, and now she could speak of both her then lover and herself with pity or sympathy.

Both tone and looks sent a thrill of half-disgust, half-regret running through the Red Hat's veins, and he slouched that crimson brim the better to shade her telltale face.

As though partially divining his feelings, Amabel La Grange spoke on more rapidly, like one who wished to complete an especially disagreeable task.

"For a month or two after that mad elopement and marriage I seemed to be in a little paradise of my own; but then the scales began to fall, and the horrible truth to make itself both seen and felt.

"For one thing, my stern father refused to forgive or even to see his wayward daughter. The blow to his pride was a terrible one, and coming as it did on top of business reverses, he broke down beneath it all.

"In less than two short months from the night I stole away from school to meet my lover, to wed him in secret, both father and fortune were lost! And then he who had coaxed me to fly with him to a promised heaven, did all he knew how to drag me down to heaven's antipodes!

"What worked such a sudden change, do you ask? The fact that my poor father died a poor man, leaving barely sufficient to pay his debts!

It seemed impossible that the wreck could be so complete, and my husband would not believe the truth until he was forced to do so. He set lawyers and detectives at work, hoping to retrieve at least a fair portion of that expected million; but that only cost him heavily, without bringing him back money or money's worth.

"My mother gave up everything, then left the city where I was born; for she was too proud to remain where she had once reigned a queen of society. And then—I lost track of her entirely!"

"It was not until all this had come to pass that I learned the full truth of the rare bargain I had made. Milo Prewitt was a gambler, a drunkard, a thief! If he ever had

parents, they came from the slums of New York, where he was bred a criminal from infancy!

"As time dragged on, he whom the law forced me to call husband, my lord and master, passed from bad to worse, until my love turned to hatred and I learned to shiver at sight of his face or sound of his voice.

"Although I could not with truth declare that I had a friend left on earth since my father died and my mother disappeared, I would have left the evil brute and fought out the battle of life for myself; but—how could I, then?"

"She came: my little angel baby!"

The woman bowed her head upon joined palms, for tears were moistening those feverishly brilliant eyes, and she dared not look into those friendly faces opposite. Even a look of sympathy just then would have broken her down completely.

Neither man spoke, for they realized how powerless mere words would be to calm her shaken nerves. And so, a little later, Amabel lifted her head, speaking more rapidly than before.

"For nearly two years longer I lived with that brutal wretch, suffering ten thousand deaths, yet trying to bear up under it all for the sake of my little baby."

"But the last straw was added to my burden, and in my fierce despair I threatened to denounce Milo Prewitt to the law he had so often broken. I only did this when human nature could endure no more. As Heaven hears me, I tried to be a true and faithful wife, even after he treated me as no man would treat a mangy cur!"

"Then—that devil in human shape struck me his bitterest blow! He stole away my baby, saying that 'twould serve as a hostage; that if I dared denounce him to the authorities, he would murder 'the imp' by inches!"

"The dirty whelp!" exploded Major Nipkins, unable to contain himself longer. "Let me go thump the glorious stuffin' out o' the critter! To do an' say the likes o' that! An' his own kid, too? Good gracious me!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ABRAHAM MUCKAJACK'S HEIRESS.

MAJOR NAPOLEON sprung to his feet, reaching forth one hand to where his famous shotgun rested; but, before he could go further, the white hand of Amabel La Grange checked him.

"Wait, my good friend," she said, with a wan smile softening the lines which grief and stronger emotions had drawn upon her face that night. "Wait, please!"

"But, durn the p'izen critter! He don't ought to live, for—"

"He belongs to me, sir, and I know how best to measure forth the punishment his manifold crimes deserve," the woman said, with increasing firmness. "Sit down, please. I have much more to tell, before you can fully comprehend all I have suffered at that demon's hands."

Overawed by her tone and manner, Major Napoleon resumed his seat, and the Lady of the Red and Black resumed her narrative of a ruined life.

"All my efforts to recover my stolen child proved fruitless. I could not even win a clue to her place of hiding, and when, my spirit almost completely broken, I sought out my husband, begging him on my knees for some information concerning my lost darling, he laughed me to scorn!"

"He swore that I should never again lay eyes upon the child, unless I became his meek and obedient slave once more! He— he even swore that he would torture my darling unless I yielded to his wishes."

"I knew how little dependence I could place upon his most earnest oaths, but what else could I do? What other hope was left me? And so I agreed to give him his way: to what end, I know not for certain."

"He told me that I stood in his way of making an independent fortune: that if he was only a single man, all the rest would come his way."

"He demanded, as the price of restoring my baby, that I permit him to get a divorce, making no defense on my part. I agreed. Anything would be better than feeling myself his legal slave; and then—my baby!"

"I made no defense. I never even looked

into the papers which he caused to be served me. I merely waited and prayed for the day to come when that decree would be granted him, for then I would once more clasp my baby to my bosom!"

"Milo Prewitt secured the divorce. He came to me, laughing and glorying over his freedom. I asked him for my child. I begged him to keep his promise, to perform his portion of that sworn contract; but—did he make his oath good?"

"No! He jeered at and mocked me, swearing that 'the kid' should still remain in his hands, a hostage against my betraying him to the law officers!"

"That blow fairly crazed me, and I—I stabbed him time and time again, until all the world seemed floating in a sea of steaming blood!"

Again the woman bowed her head. Again those two men kept silence, for they knew words could do no good there.

With a desperate effort Amabel La Grange rallied her strength, crushing down the painful emotions awakened by thus reviving the bitter past. She spoke on, rapidly, yet with downcast eyes, hands tightly clasped as they lay upon her lap.

"I firmly believed I had slain the demon, and when that bloody mist in a measure rolled away from before my eyes—when I saw Milo Prewitt lying at my feet, covered with blood, I turned and fled, neither knowing nor caring whither, for I was like one suddenly gone crazy."

"Even to this day the next week or more is a complete blank. I cannot even guess whether I fled, nor how I kept from being taken in charge by the police; for I was surely out of my head, and must have looked the crazy woman as well."

"When I finally came back to life, I was in a strange city, far from New York, lying weak and barely alive on a hospital cot."

"I learned later on that I had been a patient for nearly two months, suffering with brain-fever. I also learned, though without asking any questions which might betray me to the law as a murderer, that there was a full week missing from my life record: a loss which remains to this day!"

"I never tried to learn anything further about the fate of Milo Prewitt, for I felt so confident that he was dead—that I had stretched him a ghastly corpse at my feet that day!"

"I feared even to look at the papers covering that lost week, lest by so doing I betray myself, and so fall into the grim clutches of the law. For, as you see, I was hardly a sane woman, then!"

"For nearly a year after leaving the hospital as cured, I supported myself by sewing for starvation wages, trying to save up money enough to enable me to resume my search for my lost darling."

"It was terrible work, as you may imagine, and often I felt that it would be better to give up the unequal struggle and close my eyes in death; but just as often I would hear the voice of my baby begging me to live, if only for her!"

"At last I heard tidings of my mother, who had been lost to my sight for so many years. I learned that she had drifted West, and had married again; a man interested in mines and mining property, I was given to understand."

"In hopes of finding her, and gaining assistance through her husband to recover my stolen child, I began working my way toward the mining-country. That progress was slow indeed, but then I met with a gentleman named La Grange, who fell in love with me, offering marriage."

"He was sickly, but he loved me, and I knew he could be trusted. I tried him sorely by telling him my full story; I told him everything, from start to finish, although I more than half believed he would leave me in disgust. But his love proved strong enough even to stand that test, and we were married!"

"I was impatient to find my mother, all the same, but within two weeks from the day I married the second time, I was a widow!"

"My husband was killed in a railroad accident, near Denver, and I was seriously injured myself."

"I now found myself fairly well off, so far as money went, and when I recovered my

health once more, I resumed my search for my mother.

"I had by this time learned the name of her second husband, and by following up that clue, I found—my mother's grave!"

"She had died of mountain-fever, I was told, and her husband had drifted still further away into the mining-regions."

"Never mind just how it all worked itself out, for my narrative is growing tedious," Amabel said, with a change of tone. "Enough that I finally found my step-father; that he recognized me as his daughter and his heiress!"

"I laughed when he told me that, for never a living mortal looked poorer off as to wealth than did—my step-father, just then! Poor, dear Daddy Abe!"

Both the major and the Red Hat Sport started involuntarily at that name, and Amabel smiled faintly as she turned her head that way.

"Ah, you begin to see light, do you, my friends? Yes, I mean Abraham Muckajack!"

"He was an odd genius, but true as steel and pure as gold refined! He loved me, too, in spite of his strange ways, even as I soon learned to both love and respect him."

"He told me a strange story of a wonderful bonanza, which one day would fairly electrify the whole world, and he swore that I should fall heir to it all, when he was done with this world."

"At first I fancied it was but another of those strange, unfounded dreams, which so frequently come to prospectors, often being but the warning of insanity; but as time went on, and Daddy Abe told me more, I began to take more stock in his odd stories."

"He would not tell me just why he was unable to at once enter upon his kingdom of gold, and I never insisted. After all, I was beginning to enjoy life in a certain way, and the memory of my stolen child had become more like a dream than a reality."

"It was through the wishes of Daddy Abe that I took to dealing Red and Black; he said I ought to have some visible occupation, if only as a blind to our relationship. That he made me promise to hold secret until he was ready to proclaim his great discovery; and—I agreed!"

"That was before either of us came to Red Rock Bar for good, and while here we lived as perfect strangers to each other."

"Why should he insist upon such a strange course?" asked the Red Hat Sport, as Amabel came to a brief pause in her narrative.

"Because he feared for my life, he said," was the grave explanation given. "He said that secret enemies were after his bonanza, and had already robbed him of a portion of it. He would not tell me what he meant by that, then, though the explanation came just before his death."

"Then it wasn't all a crazy bluff, that stuff 'bout a great mine up in the northern gulches?" asked Major Nipkins, no longer able to restrain his burning curiosity. "Thar really was sech a thing, ma'am?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, there was such a mine," the woman earnestly made answer.

"Then why in thunder didn't Old Abe open 'er up?" fairly spluttered the landlord, squirming in his chair as though its seat had suddenly become uncomfortably warm. "Why didn't he—oh, good gracious me!"

"Because a portion of the chart which would lead him to that great bonanza was missing," declared Amabel, slipping a hand into the bosom of her dress, as though in search of some object important enough to be hidden there from all eyes. "He told me he had a partner who alone knew how to reach the mine, without a guide, but that a correct chart had been drawn, then cut into four equal triangles, two of which belonged to each partner."

"By piecing these bits together, any person could find the place, but—one quarter was stolen from Daddy Abe! It was similar to this!"

Amabel drew forth a bit of parchment, holding it before their eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RED HAT SPORT'S REVELATION.

That bit of stiff paper was triangular in shape, its face marked with sundry crooked

lines and spider-like circles, the whole bearing a strong similarity to the segment of chart which Dirk Ingalls had exhibited to the eager eyes of Mark Webster, not so very long before.

Major Nipkins stared with drooping jaw, as though this apparently meaningless combination of paper and ink marks held some mysterious charm; but Richard Cunningham betrayed a more moderate degree of interest, though he leaned forward for a closer inspection.

In one corner he distinguished the figure 1, just as the gambler's eyes had been arrested by the figure 3.

For a full minute Amabel La Grange permitted that inspection without explaining further; but then, as both men lifted eyes to her fair face instead, she said:

"As you can see for yourselves, gentlemen, this section of the chart is numbered one; that portion stolen from my poor step-father was marked in the same place with the figure three."

"As I told you before, the chart was first marked off on a square of parchment, then cut into quarters, with the points meeting in the center. Daddy Abe took the first and third triangle, while his partner, who was named—"

"Morris Gibbs," quietly spoke the Red Hat Sport.

Amabel gave a start of genuine surprise, her face turning a good bit paler as she gazed into that comely face opposite. A smile was playing about those bearded lips, but the drooping leaf of that crimson hat proved a pretty effectual shield for those big blue eyes.

"Yes, that was the name Daddy Abe gave me, but—how did you know it, sir?"

"Oh, that's part of another story, my friend," coolly evaded the Sport, then adding: "And this partner of Muckajack's, ma'am?"

"Had the other parts of the chart, which were marked with the figures 2 and 4, and which, if matched with the ones Daddy Abe had, would present a certain guide to that wonderful mine."

"Holy ghost!" exploded the major, no longer able to hold in. "Whar do you reckon that other critter could 'a' gone to? Why don't he—eh?"

"Permit me, please," Cunningham said, leaning forward to take that parchment triangle, as though to give it a closer inspection.

Instead, he placed it on the little table, then quickly fitted two other segments to it, making three quarters of a square, the ink lines on which matched to perfection.

Amabel bent forward to see what he was doing, then recoiled again, her face the picture of surprise, almost of fright as her lips shaped the words.

"What! You held those bits? Then—you were Daddy Abe's partner!"

"No; merely his partner's heir," coolly explained the Red Hat Sport, yet evidently fully enjoying the little sensation he had sprung upon these, his friends and companions.

"Well, if that don't knock me galley-west an' double-crooked, then I wouldn't say so!" exploded Major Napoleon Nipkins, hands on knees, feet widely separated, his head stretched forward with bulging eyes and cheeks so red that they seemed fairly purple with emotion.

The woman seemed almost as strongly affected, though she said nothing, and rather, shrunk away from both chart and he who had so deftly matched her segment with those portions bearing even numbers.

"A rather curious coincidence, isn't it?" asked Cunningham, with eyes directed toward the Lady of the Red and Black.

"So strange that—that I can hardly believe what I see!" Amabel exclaimed. "To think that you should—oh, I can't understand it, at all! It makes my poor head go 'round like a top!"

The Red Hat Sport laughed briefly, softly, like one who saw more food for mirth than for marvel in all this; but then he spoke, in a grave, easy tone:

"After all, my good friends, the miracle is very easy of explanation when you look at it from the correct angle. Shall I tell you just

how I chanced to fall heir to these interesting bits of parchment, then?"

"Interesting! Holy gracious me!"

"If you only will, sir?"

"With pleasure, although a portion of my little story may seem like boasting, or like a bid for praise," admitted the Red Hat Sport. "Still, since I can't well tell part without telling all, reckon I'll have to run my chances on that score."

"You must know, then, that I have spent quite a little of my spare time in prospecting for mineral. Like many another sanguine lunatic I had full faith that a grand fortune was waiting for my coming, if I was only lucky enough to strike the right scent!"

"I never earned my salt so far as prospecting went. For one thing, I lacked the necessary education, and, just as many others have done before me, I doubt not I have time and again passed by or over indications which, if properly followed up, would have rendered me rich for life! But that don't count, just here."

"It was while I was out on one of my prospecting tours that I met with Morris Gibbs, your step-father's partner in this mysterious mine."

"I was attracted that way by the sound of cries and groans; such sounds as only a madman or one in terrible torture could possibly make."

"I found a rude hut made of brush and stones, and inside of that frail shelter, I found a sick man; it was Morris Gibbs, and he was crazy with delirium."

"Even before I could fairly catch sight of his form or face, I knew what ailed the poor fellow; once before I had caught that awful scent, when chance business took me into a pest-house!"

"Holy grandpap!"

"You mean—what was the matter with him, sir?"

"Smallpox, which—"

With a muffled howl of indignant terror, Major Napoleon Nipkins beat a hasty retreat; so hasty, in fact, that he tumbled over backward, taking chair with him, then scrambled to his feet and hurrying to the furthest corner of the room, holding one hand to his nose, the other with palm toward the Red Hat Sport as he sniffed:

"Git out! Fer the love of—go shake yerself, dug-gun ye, p'izenin' critter! Pest-house—smallpox—good gracious me!"

Richard broke into a genial laugh at that ludicrous exhibition, and Amabel added her silvery notes as well.

"Why, major, old fellow, what's the matter with you? That time was more than a year ago, and if there was any danger of infection, that danger is long since past and gone!"

It took more than this first assurance to fully convince the major that his fears were wholly without foundation; but when Amabel added her assurance to that of the Red Hat Sport, conviction came to him, and he cautiously resumed his former position, while Cunningham spoke further:

"I had never had the disease, but neither did I stand in especial dread of it. Of course I wouldn't have crowded in, if there had been any other person to take charge of his case; but when I saw that the poor fellow was almost surely dying—that his one frail chance for life lay in close and unremitting care—I just buckled down to the job."

"It was heroic—simply heroic!" murmured Amabel; but as though he never heard her, the Red Hat Sport spoke on.

"I did all that lay in my power, and I still have faith that could I have found him even a couple of days earlier, I would surely have pulled him through! Instead—in three days from that discovery, Morris Gibbs was a corpse!"

"As generally happens, there was an interval of perfect consciousness shortly before death came, and during this time Gibbs told me the story of this wonderful claim, giving me the bits of parchment you see lying here."

"He told me to hunt up his partner, Abraham Muckajack, and claim of him an equal share in the bonanza to which that severed chart was the sole clue, now death was cutting short his thread of life."

"Well, I gave the poor fellow as decent burial as our surroundings would permit, then passed on my way, hardly giving that

divided chart a second thought, for I fancied it but another of those strange delusions which come to solitary prospectors: another 'Lost Cabin' or 'Gunnysack' Mine, you understand?"

"Yet—you came here to Red Rock Bar!" muttered Amabel.

"Yes, I came here, and I'll tell you why. I chanced to hear mentioned the name of Muckajack. Up to then that had seemed to me but another proof that Morris Gibbs was crazy on that particular point; for what white man could ever be handicapped by such an outlandish cognomen?"

"Even then I might have let the matter slip, so little had it impressed my mind; but just about that time I was without any pressing business on hand, so I finally concluded to take a little run down southward, to see if there was any truth in the rumor of an Abraham Muckajack having located in this section."

"And now? You propose to claim that wonderful mine, sir?"

"Well, that depends," gravely said the Red Hat. "Morris Gibbs made me his heir, since he had no living relative. I own two quarters of the chart, but—I'll never fight a woman for a fortune!"

"Will you consent to fight for that woman, then?" quickly asked Amabel, her cheeks glowing vividly, her eyes sparkling with new fire. "I hold a will made by Abraham Muckajack, naming me as his sole heiress, and leaving me everything of which he died possessed. Now—will you help me regain that stolen quarter of that chart? Will you join partners with me in a fight for this mine, against those cousins of Daddy Abe?"

"Of course he will!" enthusiastically chipped in the major. "Of course you'll double teams from this time on, and hyar's betting big odds the combination'll jest everlastingly wallop them durn Muckajack-asses!"

CHAPTER XXX.

HATCHING FRESH VILLAINY.

ALTHOUGH he had sneaked out of the shanty like one who feared his turn for punishment would come next, Mark Webster felt too powerful a curiosity to flee altogether; and he lurked where he could see and, at times, hear what was transpiring there in the rude shelter.

He purposely brushed up against Amabel La Grange as she passed out under the stars, and he gained the point he hoped to carry, thanks to his keen sight and trained hand.

It was the woman's fierce threat at parting which led to that bold theft, added to Amabel's carelessness in thrusting that dagger through her belt instead of returning it to its customary place of concealment.

And as the trio passed on toward the more thickly-settled portion of the town, Mark Webster gave a low, ugly chuckle, his fingers passing lightly along the blade and over the keen point of the poniard with which the lady of the Red and Black had menaced Dirk Ingalls.

Webster paused just long enough to make sure his guest was living and in no immediate danger, then he turned and noiselessly beat a retreat, heading directly as possible for the lodging place above Micky O'Hanna's saloon.

Although the hour was still comparatively early, Webster felt fairly confident of finding Herman Smokehouse at home. After meeting with such a humiliating lesson at the hands of Amabel La Grange and her champion as had been the case at the gaming tent, the Red Hat would hardly care to face the curious crowd any longer than he had to, just then.

The result justified that bit of reasoning, for at his own especial rap, Webster was invited to enter which he did, to find Smokehouse consoling himself as best he might over a cigar and a bottle.

Knowing each other so thoroughly, there was little standing on ceremony when none others were near enough to take notes. Neither thought it necessary to wear a mask before the other, and Smokehouse did not attempt to conceal his ugly frame of mind.

"Pretty rough, wasn't it?" suggested Webster, as he took a seat and helped himself to a drink from the bottle. "You're 'way

down on your luck, old man, and that's an honest fact!"

Smokehouse showed his teeth in a vicious snarl at this, then muttered in a still more vicious tone:

"I've got to down that devil of a Cunningham, or else leant! If I should try to wag along my own 'tater-row, the boys would just naturally laugh me out of the country!"

Webster covered a smile under pretense of smoothing down his mustache, and there was a peculiar glow in his eyes.

Although he himself had not come off scot-free from that brisk little affair, he felt that matters might have been a vast deal worse, viewed from his present standpoint.

"And killing a fellow like Cunningham isn't such a soft snap, either, is it?" he asked, half-mockingly.

"It's that or rack out, though!"

"Well, Red Rock Bar isn't the only camp that's well worth living in, is it, Smokehouse?"

"Of course not, only—wouldn't it look too much like running away through fear of that infernal hound?"

"Are you a slave to public opinion?" sneered the gambler, who had a certain point to carry, and who was resolved not to spare the weapons chance had placed within reach of his hand. "And, far as that goes, after what happened to-night people will hold their own opinion, anyway!"

"You mean?"

"That you can't live on here without proving yourself cock of the walk; and you know mighty well that you're no fit match for Cunningham, so soon after leaving your bed."

"But—I'll down him, yet!"

"Of course you will, in good time; but that good time is not right now. Red Rock would lynch you too mighty sudden were you to play the other Red Hat foul; and you're not enough yourself to meet and down him on the dead level. You know that, Smokehouse?"

Smokehouse did know that, but he merely gave an ugly growl. It was too much to expect a frank admission of his inferiority, just then.

"You've got some sort of fresh kink in your head, pardner," he said by way of changing the subject. "What is it, Webster?"

"Well, what's the matter with our jumping the town for awhile?" deliberately suggested the gambler, deeming it full time to unmask his batteries. "Why can't we take that gold from the *cache* in the ash-barrel, and—that chart?"

Smokehouse gave a little start at that whispered finish, a hot wave of blood coloring his pale face for the moment.

"That chart? You mean—bah, man, you're foolish!"

"Am I? Pray, how do you make that out, old fellow?"

"How could you get that bit of parchment into your clutches? You know Dirk Ingalls would never yield it up, and—killing's a mighty short road to the hemp, nowadays, pardner!"

With a brief, dry chuckle Mark Webster produced a glittering blade from where it had remained hidden until needed. As he held this up before the eyes of the Red Hat Sport, he quickly explained how it had fallen into his possession.

"She gave me the cue when she so fiercely menaced Dirk with it," he added, to make his foul idea perfectly clear to that new eager listener. "She swore to bury it hilt-deep in his black heart in case he tried to play even with her, and not only Cunningham, but the major could bear witness against her if—if Dirk Ingalls should be found dead in bed, with this bit of steel biting into his heart!"

In a low but distinct whisper came those final words, and wicked though he certainly was, Herman Smokehouse shrunk from that voice, those venomously glowing eyes.

Not for long, however. It was a fading spark of honor, and as it died out forever, his face betrayed only covetousness instead.

"Then you really think—you could find the mine with that chart for a guide, Mark?"

"I know neither of us could hope to find

it without that bit of parchment," came the swift reply. "With that in our hands, we surely hold the key to that hidden bonanza! And, while we hold that, those who hold the other bits are left helpless, don't you see?"

"Just as they hold us impotent!" muttered the Red Hat Sport.

"Not just the same, for no other living party can possibly suspect that we hold the missing portion. Now—in one word: shall we turn both tricks? If so we've got to do it all this very night!"

A brief pause, during which Herman Smokehouse sat with closed lids, like one deeply pondering; then he gave an abrupt start, holding forth a nervous hand to seal that compact of evil, saying huskily:

"It's a bargain, pardner!"

"Bargain goes! We'll hardly dare disturb the *cache* before midnight, when the camp is fairly settled down for the night. I'll get my part of the job over by then, and meet you at the *cache* itself."

Having carried his point, Mark Webster took his departure, busying himself with securing horses on which to make their midnight flitting.

For reasons which were perfectly satisfactory to himself, he did not approach his shanty until quite midnight; and then he stole a cautious peep in through the uncurtained window before crossing the thresh-old.

He chuckled grimly in his throat as he found Dirk Ingalls sleeping soundly, for that fact seemed to render his task all the more easy.

"Why kill if stealing will serve?" ran his thoughts as he crept into the house and stole without perceptible sound over to the bed upon which the wounded man was lying.

But fate had not so written, and while the gambler was trying to extract that oilskin bag from about the sleeper's neck, Dirk Ingalls awoke, giving a hoarse cry and a fierce curse as he recognized that evil pair of eyes just above his face.

He fought desperately, but in vain. One hand was over his mouth, the other rising, poniard in hand. Then the weapon fell, and all was over!

CHAPTER XXXI.

"WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT."

It was very nearly on the stroke of midnight when Herman Smokehouse stole in his socks out of the chamber over the saloon of his red-headed idolater, Micky O'Hanna.

The manner of his departure from Red Rock Bar hardly admitted of a round of leave-takings, but the crooked Sport did feel a brief pang of regret as he wondered how Micky would accept the tidings morning must bring him.

The little Irishman held such perfect faith in his patron, wholly unshaken by that initial defeat over the red hat question; but what would he say when all the camp was jeering at the flight through fright of his noble friend?

Oddly enough, that thought caused Smokehouse his sole regret, as he safely reached the ground on the outside, pausing there to pull on his riding-boots.

Hurrying away by rather a circuitous course, as being the least liable to excite suspicion should his movements be noticed at all, the Red Hat Sport drew near the stables of the Express Company, without seeing or hearing aught to give him uneasiness.

But then, just as he was pausing for another precautionary look around on all sides, to make sure there was no danger of his actions being spied upon, Smokehouse met with a disagreeable surprise.

He just glimpsed a dusky figure in motion near those ash-barrels, and his first thought was that some person had "dropped to their racket," and was trying to forestall them in securing the stolen gold.

An instant's thought convinced him how very unlikely that idea was, and he next fancied it must be Mark Webster, a trifle ahead of time.

"Does he think to cheat me out my share, though?" fiercely muttered the Red Hat, feeling for a weapon as he crouched low down and stole silently forward.

Then that shape became more distinctly visible, and Smokehouse caught his breath sharply, for he now recognized Black Jack

Tudor, and saw that the burly hostler was certainly rifling that golden case!

Oddly enough, considering his share in the robbery of the treasure-coach, neither Webster nor Smokehouse had mentioned Tudor while planning their final campaign; and now that he fairly caught him in the act of robbing in place of being robbed, the Red Hat felt most viciously inclined!

With the silent skill of an Indian on the war-path, Smokehouse crept closer and closer, his rage growing more deadly with each moment that passed, for now there was no room left for doubting; Black Jack was taking those sacks of gold from the ash-barrel, and tying them together for more expeditious carriage!

So busily engaged was the hostler in this work that he hardly cast a glance around, and when he did lift his head, fate was against him; not once did he look toward that silently-advancing shadow!

Smokehouse saw Black Jack stooping over the money-bags which he had secured to a rude but effectual sort of harness by means of which a strong man might carry the precious burden in a single load.

He covered that stooping figure with his revolver, but then changed his mind. A single shot might ruin all, through drawing dangerous curiosity that way; and instead of firing, he clubbed his pistol and leaped forward, striking viciously as he came!

Without hearing or seeing aught of his assailant, Black Jack received that blow full upon his crown, sinking forward with a faint, gasping groan. No struggle, no outcry: merely that one husky sound!

Swift as thought the Red Hat Sport jumped upon his back, gripping throat with steel-like fingers lest a yell give the alarm; but there was no resistance, and he quickly realized that his work was only too well done.

Scarcely had this conviction come to him when a low, guarded signal floated through the night-air, followed an instant later by its author: Mark Webster himself.

"What's gone wrong with you, pardner?" the gambler demanded, in a suspicious whisper, as he came up, on the other side of the ash barrels. "If I thought you were—The devil!"

He gave both start and ejaculation as he caught sight of that prostrate shape, and then stooped over it long enough to recognize their former ally.

It was the first he had seen of Black Jack since the burly hostler went down before the chair wielded by Old Steve, at the Red and Black establishment; but now a fierce rage seemed to overwhelm him as he realized the truth.

"I found him getting away with the boodle, as you see," hoarsely exclaimed Smokehouse, pointing to that little pile of canvas sacks.

"And he mustn't be left like this, you fool!" harshly muttered the gambler, making a terribly significant gesture. "If he lives to tell the truth, we'll have the whole country on our backs! So—make sure work of it, Smokehouse!"

The Red Hat Sport flinched, but in vain. Webster snatched the knife from its owner's belt, thrusting it into his hand, once more bidding him strike, and strike home!

It was an ugly job, and far worse than if he had brought the steel into play when first leaping upon the man; but Smokehouse knew that only in silent lips lay their safety, and then—'twas done!

Now that his less hardened ally was fully committed, the gambler added one vicious stab on his own hook, then rolled the carcass closer to the ash barrels, where discovery would not be so certain.

This done, the bags of gold were divided between the two criminals, and they hurried away from that accursed spot, heading direct for the place where Webster had stationed their horses in readiness for their flight.

Nothing came in their way, and they packed their blood-stained gold securely upon their nags, then mounted and rode slowly away toward Single Mile Run, feeling confident that nothing less than the nose of a trained bloodhound could pick up and carry their foot-trail over the beaten ground from the spot where Black Jack lay, writhing in his gore.

It was not until they had won fairly clear

of the town, and were ascending that long slope up which the stage road led, that any words were spoken; but then Herman Smokehouse had grown cool enough to be think himself of Dirk Ingalls and that valuable bit of parchment.

"What luck did you have with—with the other fellow, pardner?" he asked, reining his horse in just sufficiently to bring them abreast of each other.

Webster gave a surly growl, like one who had no liking for the subject just broached.

That reticence aroused suspicions of foul play in the excited mind of the Red Hat Sport, and he insisted upon an answer.

"Well, I made a water-haul, and that's all about it!" growlingly answered the gambler. "That cunning devil must have suspected me, and hid the chart away, for it surely wasn't anywhere on his carcass!"

"Then you—you searched him?"

"Of course I searched him! What else did I go there for? And—oh, it's the devil's own luck, anyway!"

Smokehouse said nothing for a few moments, but ugly thoughts were at work in his brain; and as they passed across a broad belt of clear moonlight, the gambler could not help reading at least a portion of that doubt.

The discovery stung him to the quick, for, to do him simple justice, he had never once thought of playing Smokehouse false in that respect.

"Maybe you don't believe it, old man?" he bluntly demanded, tightening his reins a bit as they reached the level stretch lying at the head of Single Mile Run. "Maybe you think I'm trying to play you dirt?"

"Well, I must say it looks infernally like it, anyway!" recklessly asserted the Red Hat Sport. "You had the chance, and I reckon honesty wouldn't stand in the way for—Ha! you devil!"

For Mark Webster jerked forth a revolver and opened fire, his first shot boring the Sport through and through! But then two guns were talking viciously, and it was hawk fighting buzzard!

CHAPTER XXXII.

GRIM JUSTICE UNTO ALL.

EXCITEMENT ran high and interest was intense in Red Rock Bar on the morning following the little racket at the Red and Black.

They were early risers at the stables of the Express Company, and he who first stuck his nose out of doors for a breath of fresh air, was first to make a truly startling discovery.

Right there in the open, half-way between the stable door and the ash-barrels, lay the figure of a man; but whether drunk, or merely sleeping after a drunk, the hostler could but guess.

Naturally enough he moved toward that figure, to see who and what it was; and then, by the early rays of morning he saw—fresh blood!

That was enough for him, and he set up a lusty howl which quickly brought others upon the scene, when the unfortunate was recognized as "Black Jack" Tudor.

At first it was believed death had claimed a victim, but even before Dr. Murphy could reach the scene of excitement, Black Jack showed signs of rallying, and ere long he was faintly but viciously denouncing Mark Webster and Herman Smokehouse as his assassins!

That was quite enough to set the pot fairly aboil, and men with grim faces and armed hands were quickly searching for the two men named.

A band hurried direct for the saloon of Micky O'Hanna, for the boarding place of the crooked Red Hat was well known; but of course they failed to find their human game.

The little Irishman cursed them up hill and down when he caught a faint inkling of their purpose; but his rage was ignored, just then, for a breathless runner from the other division of that impromptu Vigilance Committee brought them still more startling tidings.

They had hurried off to the shanty owned and usually occupied by Mark Webster, but

the gambler was not there. Another was: and that other was a corpse!

Showing above his broad bosom was the ivory haft of a poniard, the keen-pointed blade of which must be resting very near that now stilled heart!

Already the awed whisper had spread about; that weapon surely belonged to Amabel La Grange, the Lady of the Red and Black!

Meanwhile Dr. Murphy had examined the injuries received by Black Jack Tudor, and seeing no reason why he should disguise the truth from a patient who could hardly be expected to reward him for lying, he bluntly blurted forth the truth: those stabs in the back were surely mortal, and the injured man would be in great luck if he lived to see that day's sun cross the meridian.

At first the hostler refused to believe this prediction. True, he knew he was badly cut, but he suffered so little pain that he knew he would recover!

But other persons warned him of the death which was even then creeping over him, drawing nearer and nearer his fluttering heart; and at last, when Washington Alexander earnestly advised him to make his peace with both Heaven and mankind, he broke down and made full confession of the robbery.

He cleared away all mystery so far as that adroitly planned and executed coup was concerned, then went on to speak of the past night.

He had suffered severely from that knock-down at the hands of Old Steve, and after brooding over it all for a couple of hours, he made up his mind to rob the *caché* of the stolen gold, then to skip for a more congenial climate.

He swore that he was assailed by Smokehouse and Webster, who caught him in the act; he swore that he recognized them both as they talked above his body, but had been so paralyzed by that blow on the head that he was unable to defend himself, or to call for help, to beg for mercy.

"They took the boodle and lit out!" he said, in conclusion. "I want to make oath they done the robbin', plannin' it all, an' I only helped. Then—ketch 'em! Let me see 'em pull hemp afore I—go to—to hellfire!"

Almost before this confession was completed, an armed and determined party was being organized to run down the fleeing criminals, with Richard Cunningham, Old Steve and Mountain Mark among the prime movers.

They were joined by Thomas Kemper, the Express Detective, among many others: and for the most part mounted, the party swept out of town, naturally taking the stage road.

The Red Hat Sport and his two pards were still in the lead when the long slope was surmounted, and then, just as they drew near to the spot where the treasure-stage had been held up and robbed on that memorable night, the horsemen drew rein with little ejaculations of wonder.

Right there the man-hunt came to an end!

Herman Smokehouse was half-lying, half-reclining against a rock by the side of the road, gasping painfully, his face a mask of blood, and the red life-tide flowing from still other terrible wounds.

Not far beyond him lay another even more awful-looking object; the battered corpse of a man, whose foot was thrust clear through a stirrup, whose head was lying in a pool of blood and brains, while a horse stood tightly wedged in between two rocks, unable to move either way.

Stung by one of those viciously flying bullets, the animal had jumped out of the road, throwing its rider; and caught between those rocks, he had kicked and trampled that carcass with his iron-shod hind hoofs.

There was sufficient left to be recognized as Mark Webster, and the terribly-mutilated carcass was set free, then covered over with a couple of saddle-cloths.

More attention was paid Herman Smokehouse, although few who gazed on him then, and took note of the nature of his injuries, could for an instant doubt the ending; he was mortally wounded, and his life was rapidly passing away.

Knowing that the end was certain, and feeling that he would be fully justified in making such an attempt, even should the ef-

fort to talk shorten that lease of life a few minutes, Detective Kemper questioned the dying Sport, and finally learning just how that final catastrophe had come about.

"He shot me first, the cur!" painfully panted Smokehouse, strengthened for the minute by a few swallows of whisky. "He played me dirt, to begin with, for—he lied about that chart!"

Richard Cunningham gave a start at those words, for they served to confirm the belief he had already shaped in his mind; and after a few words whispered in his ear by the Red Hat Sport, Detective Kemper turned the thoughts of the dying criminal more directly toward the murder of Dirk Ingalls.

"He did it—Mark Webster—curse him!"

Then, little by little, his strength kept up by frequent swallows of whisky, Herman Smokehouse told all about that double killing.

He told a fairly straight story, despite his fierce hatred for the man who had brought him so nigh death's door; but he made it perfectly clear to all how Dirk Ingalls came to his death by the poniard which the Lady of the Red and Black had been wont to carry in her bosom.

After that he told how the gambler schemed to rob the treasure-stage, and how that trick was turned by the three confederates.

He told how the gold was *cached* right under the noses of those who were so busily searching for a clue to the robbers, and laughed huskily as he spoke!

That was his last triumph in life, for he began to sink, and instead of coherent sentences, there came merely broken snatches: oaths and curses, threats against his enemies, prominent among whom stood forth the rival claimant for the honor of wearing the red hat!

In silence the little party stood by, watching and waiting for the end, knowing that it must come right speedily, now.

There were no further efforts made to gather information from those froth-tinged lips. Herman Smokehouse had already cleared away all mystery so far as the robbery and those murders were concerned.

Then the end came!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHO OWNS THAT MUCKAJACK MINE?

WHEN word of all this came back to Red Rock Bar, the Great Golden Eagle Hotel was found to be under martial law, with Major Napoleon Nipkins holding the fort, his famous "scatter-gun" heavily charged with buckshot, his rotund waist fairly bristling with revolvers, his face glowing with honest indignation, and his gentle voice by no means utterly stilled.

Inside that citadel safely reposed Amabel La Grange, the Lady of the Red and Black, sorely shaken by those terrible events, which had been brought perilously near to her, thanks to the officious enterprise displayed by Lycurgus Dentatious, the active manager and guide of the Cousins Muckajack.

Learning to whom the fatal bit of steel and carved ivory belonged, the Bohemian detective attempted her arrest, but was foiled by the swift and decided action taken by Napoleon.

The state of siege was quickly relieved when that company returned from the chase ended by death, for all the rest of Red Rock Bar was made acquainted with the actual facts of both cases, the guilt resting where it really belonged.

When a complete and full understanding was finally reached, Detective Dentatious sprung another surprise, making a formal demand in the names of his clients, Jabez and Jonathan Muckajack, for all and sundry papers, documents, writings or instruments left behind him by Abraham Muckajack, deceased.

In due form this summons was served upon Amabel La Grange, who hardly knew what action to take, in her profound ignorance of legal forms."

Quite naturally she appealed to her gallant protector, the major, and he in turn lost little time in making that formidably sounding demand known to the Red Hat Sport.

A grim smile came to Cunningham's face

as he read that document, and at the conclusion he looked up with a nod of satisfaction to say:

"Just what I'd have chosen if the option had been offered me! Now we'll mighty soon settle who owns this mysterious Muckajack Mine. I reckon!"

The Red Hat Sport directed Major Nipkins to summon a select "jury" of representative citizens, among whom he named Michael Cammerhan and Washington Alexander, having them assemble at the Golden Eagle, in the private quarters of the landlord; while, on his part, he went to make a little business call on the Muckajack cousins and their legal representative, Lycurgus Dentatious.

Without fully disclosing his hand, and saying nothing which could shadow forth the surprise which he held in store, Cunningham easily convinced the claimants that their wisest course of action led them through the landlord's snugery.

Having settled the time of meeting, Richard hastened back to complete his arrangements for springing that double surprise.

Promptly at the hour specified the company was assembled, Lycurgus and his clients looking triumphant and already winners in the race for that wonderful bonanza, up in the northern gulches.

Amabel La Grange was somewhat paler than usual, but seemed all the more attractive on that account, while the Red Hat Sport was actually radiant.

Why should he not be? All doubts as to who had led the hold-up of the treasure-stage were banished, and no living man could point the finger of scorn or of suspicion his way! And that meant—Florence!

Like one who feels it would be a mere waste of valuable time to go into minute details, Lycurgus Dentatious declared the relationship which had existed between his clients and the deceased miner, Abraham Muckajack; then he made a formal demand for all real or personal property left by the dead, as, being his next of kin, they were the legal and rightful heirs.

The Red Hat Sport listened with due gravity to both statement and demand, then quietly asked:

"Do you rest your claims upon this point, gentlemen? Am I right in taking it for granted that you are here solely because of that relationship?"

"Isn't that sufficient grounds for our claims, sir?" politely asked the lawyer-detective.

"Provided your claim rested upon solid foundation, yes," coolly admitted the Red Hat. "But, suppose there exists other and still closer relationship? And, supposing that relationship was backed up by a will?"

"Supposing the moon was made of green cheese?" scoffed Dentatious, but with a perceptible change of color as he shot a glance of angry suspicion toward his clients.

They were the picture of amazement, and clearly felt as strong surprise as he did himself. That fact reassured Dentatious, and he smiled cynically as he again faced the Red Hat Sport.

Then the blow fell heavily.

In swift succession these indisputable proofs were presented: Amabel La Grange declared that Abraham Muckajack was her step father, and showed the will which constituted her his sole heir, in which the chart and the secret claim up north were particularly mentioned.

Then Richard Cunningham showed the few lines signed by Morris Gibbs, leaving one-half of that same mine to him, together with two segments of the divided chart.

Those three quarters were pieced together upon the table, and then Cunningham made a formal demand for the missing quarter, taken from the individual who had figured in Red Rock Bar as Dirk Ingalls.

"You can take your choice, gentlemen," he added, each word falling like a pellet of ice. "Act clean white and give up what you have not the ghost of a right to withhold, or—stand ready to answer a business call from yours truly!"

A low bow and a grim smile pointed those final words too clearly for any mistake to be made, and the cousins Muckajack shrunk away from the handsome fire-eater, almost as if his pointing finger was the muzzle of a loaded and cocked revolver!

Lycurgus Dentatious asked for an hour in which to consider that demand, and the period of grace was granted.

When the hour expired, the missing quarter of the chart was yielded up with good grace, for, as the lawyer-detective frankly declared, they were not left a leg to stand upon.

When that question of ownership was finally settled, Richard Cunningham held a brief conversation with Michael Cammerhan, then hurried off with face wreathed in smiles, to visit Florence: not at the post-office, however, but at the cozy little home in the western part of the town.

And that his call was not wholly unsatisfactory, may be inferred from the fact that when honest Michael came home for his dinner, not the first move had been made toward preparing the meal; and amidst her confused blushes Florence declared that the sun must be wrong!

After that, all went along smoothly.

With the divided chart once more complete, there was little difficulty in finding the mysterious Muckajack Mine; and in due course it was opened and developed, proving a rich and paying property, even if hardly the mountain of solid gold at first imagined.

Cunningham acted for both Amabel and himself, giving Old Steve and Mountain Mark good situations in the mine.

The Lady of the Red and Black turned her face toward the rising sun, eager to find her long lost daughter. This she did, and wrote back how happy and peaceful life had become for her, at last.

The letter came on the eve of a wedding in Red Rock Bar; a ceremony which ended in the public cremation of that famous hat of crimson hue; for, as he who had worn it through such stormy scenes, frankly declared:

"Only a 'chief' ought to wear such a distinguishing badge, and I can no longer claim that title, for—behold I am a slave, and here is my allegiance due!"

He suddenly dropped to his knees, first touching lips to the dainty little foot of his blushing bride, then placing it upon his bowed neck!

THE END.

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